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# REEDS AND MUD

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*By*

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'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,' etc.

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# REEDS AND MUD

## I

AS on every afternoon, the mail-boat announced its arrival at Palmar with several bugle blasts.

The boatman, a wizened little fellow, with an amputated ear, went from door to door receiving orders for Valencia, and on arriving at the open spaces in the single street of the village he would blow the bugle anew to give notice of his presence to the cabins scattered along the banks of the canal. A cloud of almost naked urchins followed after the boatman with a certain admiration. They felt a deep respect for the man who crossed the lake of Albufera four times a day, carrying off to Valencia the best fish of the lake and bringing back a thousand things from a city that seemed mysterious and fantastic to these gamins brought up on an island of reeds and mud.

Out of Cañamèl's tavern, which was the leading establishment of Palmar, a group of reapers, sacks on their shoulders, sauntered in the direction of the boat, which was to take them back to their districts. The women thronged the banks of the canal, which resembled a street in Venice, its sides covered with huts and *viveros*[1] where the fishermen kept eels.

On the dead water, bright as tin, the mail-boat rested

[1] Thatch-covered pondlets where eels are kept alive.

motionless: it looked like a huge coffin laden with persons and packages, its gunwales almost on a level with the stream. The triangular sail, dotted with dark patches, was topped by colorless tatters which in other years had been a Spanish flag, informing of the official character of the old hulk.

An unbearable stench rose about the vessel. Its planks had become saturated with the odor of eel-baskets and the grime of hundreds of passengers: a nauseating mixture of gelatinous skins, scales of fish bred in the mud, dirty feet and filthy clothes, which by constant friction had smoothed and polished the seats of the boat.

The passengers, for the most part reapers who came from Perelló, the extreme end of Albufera, on the edge of the sea, were shouting at the top of their lungs for the boatman to set sail as soon as possible. The vessel was already full! There was no room for any more people! . . .

This was so; but the little fellow, turning toward them the stump of his ear, which, it seemed, had been cut off so that he should not hear them, placed leisurely about the boat the baskets and the sacks that the women handed him from the shore. Each of these consignments provoked protests: the passengers were milling about or changing places, and those from Palmar who came aboard received with evangelical comment the outpouring of insults to which they were already accustomed. A little patience! As much room as they'd find in heaven! . . .

The boat settled alarmingly on receiving so much cargo, but the boatman showed not the slightest concern, accustomed as he was to hazardous trips. There was not a foot of room left. Two men were standing on the gunwale, grasping the rigging to hold themselves up; another

lay along the prow, like a ship's figurehead. Nevertheless the impassive boatman blew still another blast from his bugle amid general protest. . . . Christ! Didn't the old robber have enough yet? Were they going to spend the whole afternoon there, under the September sun, which scorched their sides and burnt their backs? . . . .

Suddenly a hush fell over the crowd and the people on board beheld approaching them, on the bank of the canal, a man supported by two women,—a white, shivering spectre with glittering eyes, wrapped in a woollen bed-blanket. The waters seemed to boil with the heat of that summer afternoon; everybody on board was perspiring, doing his best to keep free of the sticky contact with his neighbor; yet this man was shivering, his teeth chattering from fever chills, as if the world had for him been plunged into eternal night. The women who were supporting him protested coarsely when they noticed that the people on the boat did not make way. They should make room for him: he was a sick man, a laborer. While reaping rice he had caught the cursed tertian fever of Albufera, and was on his way to Ruzafa to be cured in the home of some relatives. . . . Couldn't they act like Christians? For pity's sake! Move over!

And the quivering, fever-stricken spectre repeated the words like an echo, sobbing with his shudders:

*"Per caritat! per caritat! . . . ."*

He was pushed in, without any effort on the part of the self-satisfied crowd to make way, and not finding a place, sank down among the feet of the passengers, stretching himself out amid nauseating surroundings on the deck, his face thrust against filthy hempen sandals and mud-caked boots. The people seemed accustomed to such

scenes. This boat served every purpose; it transported cargoes for meals, for the hospital, for the cemetery. Every day sick persons took passage, bound for the suburb of Ruzafa, where the denizens of Palmar, lacking facilities for treatment, hired lodgings for the cure of the tertian fever. When some wretched fellow without a boat of his own died, the coffin was placed under a seat of the mail-boat, and the vessel set sail with the same crowd of indifferent passengers, who laughed and conversed as usual, kicking the coffin, heedlessly.

After the sick man had disappeared from view, protest flamed up again. What was the earless fellow waiting for now? Was anybody missing? . . . . And then almost all the passengers greeted with guffaws a couple that came out through the door of Cañamèl's tavern, hard by the canal.

"It's Tío[1] Paco!" many of them shouted. "Tío Paco Cañamèl!"

The master of the inn, a massive, burly fellow bloated with dropsy, walked along with mincing steps. complaining like a child at every movement and leaning against his wife Neleta, a small woman with red, dishevelled hair, and warm greenish eyes that seemed to caress one with a velvety softness. Famous Cañamèl! Always sick and complaining, while his wife, who grew prettier and more amiable every day, reigned from behind her counter over all Palmar and Albufera. What he suffered from was the rich man's disease: too much money and too much high living. All you had to do was look at his paunch, his florid face, the cheeks that almost concealed his round little nose, and his eyes submerged in

[1] Tío: Uncle; colloquially an indefinite term of familiarity: old man.

billows of fat. If only they all might complain of the same illness! If he had to earn his living in water up to his waist, reaping rice, he wouldn't have time to think of being sick!

Cañamèl thrust one foot into the boat, painfully, with a weak groan, without letting go of Neleta, grumbling against the folk who made fun of his poor health. He knew how he felt! Ah, good Lord! And he took up his place in a corner which was vacated for him with that obsequious solicitude which countryfolk show to the rich, while his wife beside him openly received the blandishments of those who complimented her upon her beauty and her liveliness.

She helped her husband open a broad parasol, placed beside him a basket laden with provisions for a trip that would not last three hours, and then requested the boatman to take the very best care of her Paco. He was going to spend a short while in his cottage at Ruzafa. There he would receive the attention of the best physicians: the poor man was ill. She said these words smilingly, fondling the obese giant, who shook, at the first swaying of the boat, as if he were made of jelly. She paid no attention to the malicious ogling of the surrounding men, to the ironic, crafty glances that, after resting upon her, were fixed upon the tavern-keeper, who was doubled up in his seat under the parasol, breathing with grunts of pain.

The boatman thrust his long pole against the bank, and the boat began to glide along the canal, followed by the voice of Neleta, who, still smiling enigmatically, begged all her friends to take good care of her husband.

The hens scampered along the rubbish of the bank, following the boat. The flocks of ducks fluttered around the

prow, clouding the mirror of the canal, in which were reflected upside down the village cabins, the black boats tied at the water-line to the thatched fish-ponds, decorated at their peaks with wooden crosses, as if to place the eels inside under divine protection.

Issuing from the canal the mail-boat began to glide along the rice-fields,—vast fields of liquid mud mottled with bronze stalks. The reapers, immersed in the water, advanced sickle in hand, and their tiny boats, black and narrow as gondolas, received in their bottoms the sheaves that were to be taken to the threshing floor. In the midst of this aquatic vegetation, which seemed like a prolongation of the canals, there arose at intervals, above the little islands of mud, white dwellings topped by chimneys. These were the machines that flooded and drained the fields, according to the needs of cultivation.

The high sloping banks concealed the maze of canals, the wide, broad thoroughfares through which glided the sail-boats laden with cargoes of rice. Their hulls remained out of sight and their large triangular sails floated above the green of the fields, in the silence of the afternoon, like ghosts.

The passengers surveyed the fields like expert connoisseurs, giving their opinions of the harvests and deploring the bad luck of those whose holdings had been invaded by nitre, which killed the rice.

The boat sailed along through tranquil canals, whose water was of a yellowish color, with the golden glint of tea. At the bottom, the aquatic plants bent their heads beneath the touch of the keel. The silence and the smoothness of the water magnified all sounds. During the moments when there would be a lull in the conversation,

there could clearly be heard the painful respiration of the sick man stretched out beneath a bench, and the persistent groans of Cañamèl as he breathed, with his beard sunk in his chest. From the distant and almost invisible boats, came the sounds magnified by the calm, of a pole falling upon a deck, the creaking of a mast, the voices of the boatmen crying to one another so as to prevent a collision in the windings of the canals.

The earless pilot dropped his pole, and, jumping over the knees of the passengers, ran from one end of the vessel to the other, arranging the sail so as to take advantage of the slight afternoon breeze.

They had now entered the lake, in that part of the Albufera which is obstructed by sedge and islands, and where a nice care must be exercised in sailing. The horizon grew broader. On one side was the dark, wavy line of the pines of the Dehesa, which separates the Albufera from the sea, the almost virgin forest which extends for leagues and leagues, where wild bulls feed and large reptiles dwell in the dark, seen by few, but talked of with terror during night conversations. On the opposite side, the immense plain of the rice-fields merges into the horizon toward Sollana and Sueca, blending with the distant mountains. In the foreground, the sedge and the islets concealed the open lake, and among them the vessel made its way, mowing down the aquatic plants with its prow, its sail scraping against the reeds that leaned out from the shores. Meshes of tangled plants, gelatinous, like vicious tentacles, rose to the surface, twining about the boatman's pole; the eye could try in vain to plumb the bottom of this dark, foul-smelling vegetation, in the depths of which swarmed the creatures of the mud. All eyes expressed the same

thought: whoever fell into those waters would find it hard to get out.

A herd of bulls was grazing on the beach of reeds and pools that bordered the Dehesa. Some of them had swum to the nearby islands, and, sunk in mire up to their bellies, were ruminating in the reed grass, splashing loudly about. They were huge, filthy beasts, with enormous horns and slavering snouts, their backs covered with scabs. They looked wildly at the laden vessel that was sailing by them, and as they shook their heads they scattered a cloud of mosquitos that soon returned to their curly manes.

At a short distance, on a bank that was little more than a neck of mud between two sheets of water, the passengers could make out a man hiding in a squatting posture. Those from Palmar recognized him.

"It's Sangonera!" they shouted. "Sangonera the drunkard!"

And waving their hats to him, they yelled and asked where he had begged his drink that morning, and whether he was considering spending the night there where he was. Sangonera did not move; but, weary of the laughter and the shouting of those on board, he at last stood up, and executing a graceful pirouette, slapped himself several times upon his back as a scornful gesture, then gravely squatted down again.

At the sight of him when he stood up the laughter redoubled, provoked by his strange appearance. His hat was decorated with a lofty plume of flowers from the Dehesa, and on his breast, and around his sash as well, were entwined some of the wild bell-flowers that grow among the reeds along the banks.

Everybody talked about him. Notorious Sangonera!

There wasn't his like in all the lake towns. He had firmly resolved never to work like the rest of mankind, asserting that labor was an insult to God, and he spent his days looking for someone to treat him to a drink. He would get drunk in Perelló and sleep it off in Palmar; he would guzzle in Palmar, to awake on the following day in Saler; and if there were festivities going on among the land folk, he would be found in Silla or Catarroja hunting up, among the people who cultivated fields in the Albufera, a generous soul to invite him to drink. It was a miracle that his corpse had not been found at the bottom of a canal, after so many trips on foot across the lake, dead drunk, following the boundaries of the rice-fields, which were as narrow as the edge of an ax, going through the sluice-gates with the water up to his breasts and walking over spots of sliding mud where nobody dared to venture without a boat. The Albufera was his home. His instinct as a child of the lake rescued him from danger, and many a night, as he entered Cañamèl's tavern to beg a glass, he was as viscous to the touch and smelled as much of the mire as an eel itself.

Catching the drift of the conversation, the tavern-keeper would murmur amidst his groans. Sangonera! A shameless good-for-nothing! He had chased the drunkard out of his house a thousand times! . . . . And the bystanders laughed as they recalled the vagabond's strange decorations, his mania for covering himself with flowers and weaving himself garlands like a savage as soon as the wine began to take effect in his famished stomach.

The vessel was penetrating into the lake. Between two masses of sedge resembling the jetties of a harbor, could be seen a large stretch of smooth, shining water of a

whitish blue. This was the *lluent,* the real Albufera, the open lake, with its thickets of reeds stretching for long distances, wherein the birds of the lake, so ruthlessly pursued by the hunters from the city, fled for refuge. The boat coasted along the borders of the Dehesa, where certain muddy bogs covered with water were slowly being converted into rice fields.

In a little lagoon enclosed by banks of mud a man of powerful muscles was dumping basketfuls of dirt from his boat. The passengers gazed at him with admiration. This was Tío Tono, the son of Tío Paloma, and the father in turn of Tonet *el Cubano* (the Cuban). And as they named this last fellow many glanced slyly in Cañamèl's direction; the tavern-keeper continued to grumble as if he had heard nothing.

There was not in all Albufera a more industrious fellow than Tío Tono. He had taken it into his head to become a landed proprietor, to have his rice-fields and not have to live from fishing, like Tío Paloma, who was the oldest boatman in Albufera; and all alone—since his family lent him assistance only sporadically, growing weary of the vast extent of the enterprise—he was filling in with earth the deep lagoon that had been ceded to him by a wealthy woman who did not know what to do with it.

It was a matter of years, perhaps of an entire life-time, for a lone man. Tío Paloma poked fun at him; his son helped him now and then, only to declare that he was exhausted after a few days of it, and Tío Tono, with a faith that could not be shaken, went on with the work, aided only by La Borda, a poor little waif whom his late wife had taken out of the foundling hospital,—a creature who

was exceedingly timid but as persevering in her work as he himself.

Greetings, Tío Tono, and don't give up! You'll be reaping rice from your field! And the boat sailed off without the obstinate laborer raising his head for more than a moment to reply to the ironic greetings.

A little farther on, in a tiny bark as small as a coffin, they caught sight of Tío Paloma near a row of stakes, placing his nets; he would draw them in on the following day.

On the mail-boat a discussion arose as to whether he were nearer ninety, or a hundred years old. What that man had seen, without ever leaving Albufera! The personages that he had dealt with! . . . . And they repeated the tales, which had been exaggerated by popular credulity, of his insolent familiarities with General Prim, whom he had served as boatman in that worthy's hunting trips over the lake; his rudeness to the great ladies, and even to queens. The old man, as if he had divined that he was the subject of these commentaries and was quite sated with fame, remained bent over, examining the nets, showing his back, covered with a large-checked blouse, and the black ragged cap jammed down upon his thin, large ears which seemed not to belong to his head at all. As the boat sailed past him he raised his head, revealing the dark chasm of his toothless mouth and the circles of reddish wrinkles that converged around his deep eyes, which were lively with glances of ironic brightness.

The wind began to rise. The sail swelled with new shocks and the heavily-laden vessel inclined so much that the shoulders of those who were seated at the gunwale

were splashed. Around the prow the water, violently cut, rippled and gurgled more and more loudly. They were now in the real Albufera, in the immense *lluent,* blue and as smooth as a Venetian mirror, portraying upside down the vessels and the distant shores with their slightly serpentine outline. The clouds seemed to roll at the bottom of the lake like locks of white wool; on the beach of the Dehesa some hunters followed by dogs were mirrored in the stream, walking along with bowed heads. The large villages of the Ribera, their land concealed by the distance, seemed to float upon the lake.

The wind, growing gradually stronger, changed the surface of the Albufera. The undulations grew more noticeable, the waters took on a greenish hue, like that of the sea, the bottom of the lake was hidden and on the banks of thick sand formed from shells the waves began to throw yellowish locks of spume, soapy bubbles that shone iridescent in the sunlight.

The boat glided along the Dehesa and before it there passed rapidly the sandy hills, whose crests were topped by the guards' huts, the thick curtains of thickets, and the groups of twisted pines weird in shape like bundles of writhing limbs. The passengers, kindled by the velocity of the boat, excited by the danger to which they were exposed by the vessel's sailing with one of its sides on a level with the water, shouted greetings to the other barks that passed in the distance, and put out their hands to feel the impact of the waves lashed by their rapid progress. The water whirled around the helm. At a short distance swam two *capuzones,* dark birds that plunged into the water and after long immersion thrust out their heads again, amusing the passengers with these fishing maneuvers. Farther

away, on the *matas,* the large islands of aquatic cane-plantations, the coots and the *collvèrts* rose in flight as the boat approached, but slowly, as if they felt that these were peaceful folk. Some of the passengers grew red with emotion as they beheld them. . . . What an excellent target! Why should the law prohibit anybody from shooting them without permission, just as he pleased? And while the more bellicose waxed indignant, there came from the bottom of the boat the groans of the sick man, while Cañamèl sobbed like a child, scorched by the rays of the setting sun that stole in under his hat.

The forest seemed to withdraw toward the sea, leaving between it and the Albufera a vast, flat plain, covered with wild vegetation and cleft here and there by the shining lamina of a tiny lagoon.

This was the plain of Sancha. A flock of goats tended by a boy was grazing in the underbrush, and at sight of it there rose in the memories of these children of Albufera the tradition which had given its name to the plain.

Those from the inland who were returning to their homes after having earned the big pay of the harvest asked who was this Sancha that the women named with such terror, and those of the lake told the stranger nearest to them the simple legend that they had all learned in their childhood.

A little goatherd like the one who was now walking along the bank was formerly tending his goats on the self-same plain. But that was many years ago,—many! . . . . So many, that none of the oldest inhabitants of Albufera had known the goatherd: not even Tío Paloma himself.

The boy dwelt like a savage in the solitude, and the

boatmen who went fishing in the lake would hear him on calm mornings crying from afar:

*"Sancha! Sancha! . . . ."*

Sancha was a small serpent, the only friend he had. The evil creature would answer to his cries, and the goatherd, milking his choicest goats, would offer her a bowl of milk. Afterwards, during the warm hours of the day, the boy would make himself a set of pipes from the reeds that he cut from the sedge, and would play gently upon them, with the reptile at his feet. The snake would draw erect part of her body and contract it as if she wished to dance to the rhythm of the sweet tones. At other times the goatherd would amuse himself by undoing Sancha's coils, stretching her out in a straight line upon the sand, delighted to behold with what a nervous impulse she would coil up again. When, tired of these games, he would take his flock to the other end of the plain, the serpent would follow him like a little dog, or, twining about his legs would reach almost to his neck, remaining there languidly and motionless, with her diamond-like eyes fixed upon those of the youth; the down of his face stood on end at the hissing from her triangular mouth.

The people of Albufera considered him a sorcerer, and more than one woman of those who stole wood in the Dehesa, on beholding him approaching with Sancha dangling from his neck, would make the sign of the cross as if the devil himself had appeared. Thus they all understood how the goatherd could sleep in the forest without fear of the great reptiles that swarmed in the thicket. Sancha, who must be the devil, protected him from all harm.

The serpent grew, and the goatherd had become a man, when the inhabitants of the Albufera lost track of him. It

was learned that he had become a soldier and had gone off to fight in the Italian wars. No other flock ever came to graze in the wild plain. The fishermen, on landing, did not care to venture among the high reeds that covered the pestiferous lagoons. Sancha, for lack of the milk that the goatherd used to give her, was forced to pursue the innumerable rabbits of the Dehesa.

Eight or ten years passed by, and one day the inhabitants of Saler saw traveling along the road from Valencia, leaning against a staff, and with a knapsack on his shoulder, a soldier,—a meagre, yellowish-complexioned grenadier, with black leggings that reached above his knees, a white jacket and balloon trousers of red cloth, with a military cap mitre-shaped stuck on his carefully curled and plaited hair. His flowing mustache did not prevent his being recognized. It was the goatherd, who had come back, longing to see again the land of his childhood. Skirting the lake he took the road to the forest and reached the swampy plain where once upon a time he used to tend his flock. Nobody. The dragon-flies fluttered their wings with a soft buzzing above the tall reeds, and in the pools hidden beneath the underbrush the frogs splashed about, frightened by the approach of the grenadier.

*"Sancha! Sancha!"* cried the former goatherd softly.

Absolute silence. There came to him the somnolent chant of an invisible boatman who was fishing in the middle of the lake.

*"Sancha! Sancha!"* he cried again, this time at the top of his voice.

And after he had repeated his call many times, he noticed a disturbance in the tall grass and heard the crackle of bent reeds, as if a heavy body were crawling along.

Amid the cane there shone two eyes on a level with his own, and there advanced a flat head, moving a forked fang and uttering a sinister snort that fairly froze his blood and petrified him on the spot. It was Sancha, but a Sancha grown huge, arrogant, rising to the height of a man, dragging her tail among the thickets till it was lost to view, with a multi-colored skin and a body as thick as the trunk of a pine.

"Sancha!" exclaimed the soldier, recoiling with fright. "How you have grown! . . . . How big you are!"

And he tried to flee. But his old friend, after her first astonishment had passed, seemed to recognize him and wound herself around his shoulders, hugging him with a coil of her wrinkled skin, shaken by nervous tremors. The soldier struggled to get free.

"Let go, Sancha, let go! Don't hug me. You're too big for that sort of game."

Another coil wound tightly about his arms, gripping them like a vise. The reptile's mouth caressed him as in bygone days; her breath blew through his mustache, causing him an anguished shudder, and in the meantime the coils contracted, tightened about him, until the soldier, stifled, his bones cracking, fell to the ground, bound in the coil of variegated rings.

A few days later some fishermen came upon his corpse: a shapeless mass, with the bones broken and the flesh livid from Sancha's overpowering embrace.

The strangers on board laughed to hear the tale, while the women moved their feet with a certain restlessness, imagining that the creature stirring and groaning near their skirts was Sancha, hiding in the bottom of the boat.

They had reached the end of the lake. Once again the

vessel entered a labyrinth of canals, and in the distance, far off, above the immense rice-field, could be made out the houses of Saler, the little town of the Albufera which is nearest Valencia. Its harbor was filled with countless tiny craft and large boats that cut the horizon with their rough, unshaped masts, like pines with the bark peeled off.

The afternoon was drawing to a close. The vessel glided along less rapidly over the still waters of the canal. The shadow of the sail passed like a cloud over the rice-fields that were reddened by the setting sun, and on the sloping banks, against a background of orange hue, the silhouettes of the passengers stood out.

There was a continuous file of persons returning from their fields, standing in their tiny black craft, gunwales almost on a level with the water. These skiffs were the horses of Albufera. From early childhood, all who were born into this lake-dwelling tribe learned to manage them. They were indispensable for working in the fields, for visiting a neighbor's house, for earning one's living. Along the canal came a child, a woman, or an old man, plying the pole dexterously, digging it into the muddy bed so as to send the shoe that served them as a vessel gliding over the still waters.

In the small canals near by, other little boats, hidden behind the low banks, were gliding along; above the sedge one could see the boatmen, their bodies erect and rigid, propelling themselves along by quick jabs of their fists.

From time to time the passengers on the mail-boat noticed a wide gap in the banks, through which the waters of the canal scattered with neither noise nor agitation, slumbering beneath a layer of slimy, floating verdure. These openings were barred by the eel nets stretched from

stakes. As the boat approached, huge rats bounded from the rice lands, disappearing into the mud of the canals.

Those who before had been filled with the hunter's enthusiasm at sight of the lake game, felt their passion rise anew on seeing the canal rats. What a fine shot! An excellent supper! . . . .

The inland folk spat with disgust, amid the laughter and the protests of Albuferan people. A delicious morsel! How could they venture an opinion if they had never tried it? The rats of the marshes fed only upon rice; they were a dish fit for a prince. All you had to do was see them by the dozens in the Sueca market, skinned, hanging by their tails over the butchers' blocks. The rich folk bought them; the aristocracy of the Ribera towns ate nothing else. And Cañamèl, as if he felt it incumbent upon him as a rich man to say something, stopped groaning long enough to make the grave assertion that he knew but two animals in all the world without a gall: the dove and the rat. That settled it.

The conversation grew livelier. The strangers' demonstration of disgust inflamed the Albufera folk. The physical degeneration of the lake people, the poverty of a people deprived of meat, knowing no other animals than those it saw running about through the Dehesa, living all its life condemned to feed upon eels and the fish that lived in the mud, was revealed in the form of bragging, with the visible desire of astonishing the strangers by boasting of the strength of their stomachs. The women enumerated the excellencies of the rat as an ingredient of the *paella;* many had eaten it without realizing it, amazed at the sweet taste of an unknown meat. Others recalled the dishes made of serpents, praising highly the round, white sweet slices,

which tasted far better than eels, and the earless boatman broke the silence he had maintained during the entire voyage to recall a certain newly born kitten that he had eaten with some friends in Cañamèl's tavern, cooked by a certain sailor who, as a result of having sailed all around the globe, had golden hands for such dishes.

It began to grow dark. The fields held deep shadows. The canal took on the whiteness of tin in the tenuous light of dusk. At the bottom of the water the first stars shone, trembling with the passage of the boat.

They were near Saler. Above the roofs of the cabins rose, between two pilasters, the bell of the house of the *Demaná,* where huntsmen and boatmen assembled on the eve of the lot-drawing for fishing and hunting grounds. Near the house could be seen a large diligence, which was to convey the mail-boat's passengers to the city.

The breeze died down, the sail fell lifeless against the mast, and the fellow with the amputated ear grasped his pole, thrusting it against the embankment to move his vessel.

A small boat laden with earth passed by, bound for the lake. A girl was plying the pole industriously at the prow, and at the other end she was being helped by a young man with a broad-brimmed hat of finely woven straw.

Everybody knew them. They were the children of Tío Tòni, carrying earth for his field: La Borda, that tireless foundling who was worth more than a man, and Tonet *el Cubano,* Tío Paloma's grandson, the handsomest young man in all Albufera,—a chap who had seen the world and had plenty to tell.

"Good-bye, *Bigòt!*[1]" they shouted to him familiarly.

[1] Mustache.

They had given him this nickname because of the mustache that accented his strong swarthy face—a decoration little known in the Albufera, where all men shaved their faces clean. Others asked him with ironical astonishment since when had he taken to work.

The skiff sailed on without any indication from Tonet, who had cast a rapid glance at the passengers, that he had heard the gibes.

Many looked with a certain insolence at Cañamèl, permitting themselves the same brutal jests that they uttered in his tavern. . . . Look out, Tío Paco! You are going to Valencia, while Tonet will spend the night in Palmar! . . . .

The inn-keeper at first pretended not to hear, until, not being able to bear it any longer, he straightened up with a nervous start, a flash of anger gleaming in his eyes. But the flabby bulk of his body seemed to weigh upon his will, and he sank back into his seat as if overwhelmed by the effort, once again groaning painfully and murmuring between plaints:

"Liars! Filthy liars!"

## II

TÍO PALOMA'S cabin was situated at one end of Palmar.

A great fire had divided the town, changing its aspect. Half Palmar had been devoured by the flames. The straw huts had been rapidly reduced to ashes, and their owners, desiring thereafter to live without fear of fire, built structures of brick upon the charred sites, many of them pawning their scanty belongings in order to transport the material, which proved very costly due to having to ferry it across the lake. The part of the village destroyed by the fire was soon covered with cottages, their fronts painted rose, green, or blue. The other section of Palmar retained its original character, the roofs of the cabins round at front and back, like boats placed upside down upon mud walls.

The cabins extended from the little church plaza to the far end of the town near the Dehesa, separated from one another through fear of a fire, as if scattered at random.

Tío Paloma's cabin was the oldest. His father had built it in the days when not a human being could be found in Albufera free from the tremors of fever. The thickets at that time reached to the walls of the cabins. The hens disappeared at the very door of the house, according to Tío Paloma, and when they next showed up they brought with them a brood of newly hatched chicks. In those days otters were still hunted in

the canals and the population of the lake was so small that the fishermen scarcely knew what to do with the fish that filled their nets. Valencia, to them, was the end of the world, and the only one to come from there had been the marshal Suchet, who was created, by King José, Duke of la Albufera and lord of the lake and the forest with all their wealth.

Recollection of this personage was the furthest back that Tío Paloma's memory could go. The old man imagined he could still see him, with his dishevelled hair and his flowing side-whiskers, dressed in a red frock-coat and a round hat, surrounded by men in bright uniforms who loaded his muskets for him. The marshal had gone hunting in Tío Paloma's father's boat, and the little urchin, hidden at the prow, had gazed at him with admiration. Many a time he had laughed at the gibberish in which the marshal lamented the decline of the nation or commented upon the events of a war between Spaniards and the English, only scant details of which had penetrated to the lake region.

Once he had gone with his father to Valencia to present the Duke of la Albufera with a marsh eel, notable for its size, and Suchet, attired in his grand uniform with its dazzling gold trimming, surrounded by officers who seemed satellites of his splendor, had received them smilingly.

When Tío Paloma became a man and, upon his father's death found himself the owner of the cabin and of two boats, there was no longer a duke of la Albufera, but instead, Knights commander, who governed it in the name of the king their master; excellent city folk who never came to the lake, allowing the fishers to pillage the Dehesa

and freely hunt the birds that were bred in the sedge.

Those were the good old days, and when Tío Paloma, at the gatherings in Cañamèl's tavern, recalled them in his broken old voice, the younger men quivered with enthusiasm. Men then fished and hunted at the same time, without fear of guards or fines. At nightfall they came home with dozens of rabbits caught with their ferrets in the Dehesa, and in addition to this, baskets of fish and strings of birds shot in the canebrakes. Everything belonged to the king, and the king was far away. The Albufera did not, at that time, as it now did, belong to the State (whoever that gentleman might be!) nor was the hunting privilege controlled by contractors and Dehesa the property of lessees, so that the poor folk could not discharge a shot or gather a faggot without a guard rising before them with his bandoleer across his chest and his carbine aimed at them.

Tío Paloma had maintained the pre-eminence of his father. He was the foremost boatman of the lake, and no personage ever came to Albufera that he didn't take him for a trip among the reed islets, pointing out the curiosities of land and water. He recalled Isabel II in her youth, filling the entire poop of the decorated boat with her wide skirts, her rounding, girlish breast trembling at every thrust of the boatman's pole. His hearers would laugh at the recollection of his trip over the lake with Empress Eugenia. She sat in the prow, a svelte figure, dressed like an Amazon, with her musket in constant readiness, bringing down the birds that skilful beaters by sticks and shouts put up in flocks from the canebrakes; and at the other end, Tío Paloma, sly and crafty, with his old gun between his legs, shooting the birds that escaped the grand

dame and calling the *collvèrts* to her attention, in a fantastic Spanish: "Your Majesty . . . . look! There comes a *collovierde* from behind."

Everybody liked the old boatman. He was insolent with the rudeness of a son of the lake; but the cajolery that was wanting in his speech was expressed by his gun, a venerable weapon, so much repaired that it was hard to tell just how much of the original gun was left. Tío Paloma was a wonderful marksman. His fame expanded in the mouths of the region's tale-bearers, who went so far as to assert that he had brought down four coots with a single shot. Whenever he wanted to flatter a mediocre marksman he would take up his position behind him in the boat and shoot at the same time so that the shots would blend, and the huntsman, seeing the birds fall, would be filled with astonishment at his own skill, while the boatman would maliciously make faces behind his back.

His favorite recollection was that of General Prim. He had made the general's acquaintance on a stormy night while carrying him across the lake in his boat. Those were the days of misfortune. The guards were approaching; the general was disguised as a workingman and was fleeing from Valencia, after having made an unsuccessful attempt to rouse the garrison to mutiny. Tío Paloma took him as far as the sea, and when he next saw him, years later, he was the head of the government and the idol of the nation. Abandoning political life, he once escaped from Madrid for a hunt in the lake, and Tío Paloma, bold and exceedingly familiar with him as a result of the old adventure, scolded him as if he were a little boy whenever he missed a shot. For Tío Paloma there did not exist any human greatness: men were

divided into good hunters and bad. Whenever the hero discharged without hitting his target the boatman would get so furious that he would even use the familiar pronoun in addressing him. "General . . . . inability! And was this the brave fellow who had accomplished such wonders yonder in Morocco? . . . Look, look and learn." And while the famous pupil laughed, the boatman would shoot off his gun almost without looking, and the coot would fall like a lump of lead into the water.

All these anecdotes endowed Tío Paloma with great prestige among the lake people. What that man might not have been had he simply cared to open his mouth and ask whatever he pleased of his fellow men! . . . . But he was always taciturn and sharp-tongued; he treated high-born personages as if they were tavern cronies; he made them laugh with his insolence when he was in bad humor, and with his twisted, bilingual phrases when he meant to be affable.

He was content with life, despite the fact that it was becoming more and more difficult, because of his advancing age. A boatman, always a boatman! He despised the persons who cultivated the rice-fields. They were *labradores*[1] and to him this word signified the greatest affront.

He was proud to be a man of the water, and many a time he would follow the windings of the canals rather than shorten the distance by cutting across the banks. He never set foot willingly upon any other soil than that of the Dehesa, to send a few shots at rabbits, making off at the approach of the guards. If it were left entirely to him, he would gladly eat and sleep in his boat, which was

[1] Farmers, "landlubbers."

to him what the shell is to an aquatic animal. The instincts of the primitive lacustrian races lived again in the old man.

All he desired for complete happiness was to be rid of a family, to live like a fish of the lake or a bird of the sedge, making his nest today on an islet and tomorrow in a canebrake. But his father had insisted upon his getting married. He did not like to see that cabin, his own handiwork, forsaken; and the bohemian of the lakes found himself compelled to dwell in the society of his kind,—to sleep beneath a straw roof, to contribute his share toward the maintenance of the curate and to obey the petty magistrate of the island, always some shameless wretch,—according to his words—who, in order to avoid work sought the favor and protection of influential men in the city.

He could hardly recall what his wife had looked like. She had spent many years of her life at his side, without having left in his memory any recollection other than her skill at mending nets and the knack she had for kneading the bread for the entire week every Thursday, taking it to an oven with a round, white cupola, resembling an African ant-hill, which was situated at one of the ends of the island.

They had had many children,—many; but all except one had died "opportunely." They were pale, sickly creatures, engendered with a view to having them contribute to the support of the house, by parents who came together only with a desire of transmitting heat to each other, trembling as they did with the swamp fever. The children seemed to be born bearing in their blood the shudders of the tertian fever. Some had died of consumption,

weakened by the insubstantial diet of fresh-water fish; others had been drowned by falling into the canals near the house; and if one survived,—the youngest,—it was to clutch tenaciously at life, with a mad desire to survive, confronting the fevers and sucking from the flaccid breasts of his mother the scant substance of an everlastingly sick creature.

Tío Paloma considered these misfortunes logical and indispensable. Folks should praise the Lord, who remembers the poor. It was repulsive to behold how families multiplied in poverty; and without the mercy of the Lord, who from time to time made a gap in this pest of children, there wouldn't be enough food in the lake for all and they'd be forced to devour one another.

When Tío Paloma's wife died he, already an old man, found himself the father of a seven-year old boy. The boatman and his son Tono remained alone in the cabin. The boy was as clever and industrious as his mother. He cooked meals, repaired the cabin, and took lessons from the neighboring housewives so that his father should not feel the absence of a woman in the household. He did all this with a serious mien, as if the terrible struggle he had made to survive had left in him ineradicable traces of sadness.

His father strode along with an air of satisfaction when he walked toward the boat followed by the little fellow, who was almost hidden beneath a heap of nets. He grew up rapidly, becoming daily stronger, and Tío Paloma would swell with pride to see with what strength he drew the *mornells* out of the water or sent the boat gliding across the lake.

"He's the most manly man in all Albufera," he would

say to his friends. "His body is now taking revenge for the sickness he had when he was a little one."

The women of Palmar were no less ready to sing the praises of his sound habits. He didn't get mixed up in the wild pranks of the young loafers who congregated in the tavern, nor did he gamble with certain scoundrels who, as soon as the fishing was over, would stretch out on their bellies across the reeds, behind some cabin, and spend hours shuffling a filthy deck of cards.

Always reserved and ready for work, Tono never occasioned his father the slightest displeasure. Tío Paloma, who could not fish in the company of others, since at the merest oversight he would grow furious and attack his companion, never scolded his son, and when, in a moment of ill humor he would issue an order to the boy, he would find that the child, having divined his intention, had already tackled the work.

When Tono grew to manhood, his father, fond of a nomadic existence and rebelling against all family ties, experienced the same desires that had been felt by the original Tío Paloma. What were these two men doing, isolated in the solitude of the old cabin? It was unpleasant for him to behold his son,—a broad, sinewy giant,—bending over the fireplace, in the center of the cabin, poking the fire and preparing the meal. Many a time he had felt remorse, contemplating his short, hairy hands, with their iron fingers, scrubbing pans and scraping the lake fish, removing with a knife the hard scales shining with metallic reflections.

During the winter nights they were like a couple of shipwrecked sailors who had taken refuge upon a desert

island. Not a word between them, not a laugh, not a sound of a woman's voice to cheer them. The cabin was a gloomy place. In the center, the fire burned in a hearth on the floor,—a small square space enclosed by bricks. Opposite, the kitchen bench, with its row of poor pots and old bottles. On each side the partitions of the two rooms, made of reeds and mud, like the rest of the hut; and above the partition walls, which were only the height of a man, the interior of the black roofing, with a coat of soot, smoked from the fires of many years, with no air passage other than an opening in the straw covering, through which the stormy winds of winter entered with their shrill blasts. From the ceiling hung the waterproof garments of father and son, worn in the night fishing expeditions: stiff, heavy trousers, jackets—with a stick thrust from sleeve to sleeve—of coarse texture, yellow and shiny from the oil rubbings. The wind, entering through the gap that served as chimney, would sway these strange scarecrows, which caught in reflections on their oily surface the red light from the fireplace. It looked as if the two inhabitants of the cabin had hanged themselves from the ceiling.

Tío Paloma was bored. He liked to talk: in the tavern he could swear as much as he pleased, he maltreated the other fishermen, and dazzled them with his recollections of noted personages he had known; in his own house, however, he was at a loss for speech, and his words, eliciting no response from his silent and obedient son, were swallowed into a respectful and overpowering silence. The boatman said so himself, in the tavern, with his jovial, brutal manner. That son of his was a mighty fine

chap, but he didn't take after his father at all; he was always so quiet and submissive. His late wife must have played some sort of trick on him.

One day he accosted Tono with the imperious expression of a father of the Latin type who allows his children no will of their own and disposes of their future and their lives without even troubling to consult them. He must marry: he wasn't at all well off like this; the house needed a woman. And Tono received this command as if he had been told to get the large boat ready for the following day to meet a hunter from Valencia at Saler. Very well. He would try to fulfil his father's order as soon as possible.

And while the youth looked about on his own account, the old boatman communicated his intentions to all the mothers of Palmar. His Tono wished to get married. Everything he owned would go to the boy: the cabin, the large boat with its new sail, and another old one which was even better; two smaller boats, and he could not recall how many nets, and on top of this, the virtues of the boy himself,—a hard worker, sober, with no vices and exempt from military service because he had drawn a lucky number. In short: he wasn't a wonderful match, but his Tono wasn't as poor as a toad in the canals. And besides, the sort of girls that there were in Palmar! . . . .

The old fellow, with his scorn of womankind, spat upon beholding the maidens from among whom his future daughter-in-law was to be chosen. No. These virgins of the lake weren't much to look at with their clothes that were washed in the filthy water of the canals, smelling of mud, and hands saturated with a viscous substance that seemed to penetrate to their very bones. Their hair dis-

colored by the sun, whitish and scant, was scarcely enough to shade their thin, reddish faces, in which the eyes shone with the glow of a fever that was ever renewed by drinking from the waters of the lake. Their angular profiles, the slippery meagerness of their bodies, and the nauseating odor from their skirts, imparted to them a certain resemblance to the eel, as if a monotonous and unvaried diet of many generations had resulted in stamping upon these people the traits of the creature that served them as sustenance.

Tono chose one of these,—any one at all—the one who interposed the fewest obstacles to his shyness. The wedding took place and the old man had another person in the cabin to speak with and to scold. He felt a certain intense pleasure on seeing that his words did not fall into a vacuum and that his daughter-in-law raised her voice in protest against his ill-humored exactions.

Together with this source of satisfaction came a disappointment. His son appeared to have forgotten the family traditions. He scorned the lake, and went off to seek his living in the fields, and in September, when the rice was harvested and wages were high, he abandoned his boat and became a reaper, like many another who roused Tío Paloma's indignation. This labor of working in the mud, of scarring the fields, was all well enough for strangers, for those who dwelt far from Albufera. The children of the lake should be free of such slavery. Not for nothing had God placed them near that water, which was a blessing. In its depths was their food, and it was an absurdity, a disgrace, to work all day in mud up to your waist, your legs gnawed by leeches and your back scorched by the sun, just to reap a few ears that weren't

your own. Was his son going to become a *labrador?* . . . . And as he asked this question the old man invested his words with all the stupefaction, all the unbounded amazement aroused by an unheard-of atrocity, as if someone had just told him that one fine day the whole lake of Albufera would dry up.

Tono, for the first time in his life, dared to oppose his father's wishes. He would fish, as usual, during the rest of the year. But now he was married, the needs of the house were greater, and it would be imprudent to scorn the excellent wages of the harvest. He was paid more than the others, because of his strength and his application to the work. Times should be taken as they come; rice was being more and more cultivated on the shores of the lake, the old pools were being filled in with earth, the poor were becoming rich, and he wasn't such a fool that he was going to lose his share in the new life.

The boatman grumblingly accepted this transformation in the customs of his house. The common-sense and the seriousness of his son compelled a certain respect, but as he leaned against his oar on the banks of the canal, conversing with other boatmen of the good old days, he protested vehemently. They were going to transform the Albufera! Within a few years nobody would know the place. In the direction of Sueca they were installing iron machinery in houses with huge chimneys and . . . . the smoke rose from them in clouds! The old *norias,* so peaceful and agreeable, with their wheels of decayed wood and their black buckets, were to be replaced with infernal machines that churned the waters with the noise of a thousand devils. It would be a miracle if all the fish didn't take to the sea, disgusted by such innovations!

They were going to cultivate everywhere; they were shovelling dirt and more dirt into the lake. As few years as yet remained to him, he would live to see the last eel, having no room in which to move, wriggle her tail in the direction of the mouth of the Perelló and disappear into the sea. And Tono mixed up in this piratical work! To think that a son of his, a Paloma, should have become a *labrador!* . . . . And the old man laughed as if he had imagined an utter impossibility.

Time passed and his daughter-in-law presented him with a grandson, Tonet, whom the grandfather on many an afternoon carried in his arms to the banks of the canal, twisting his pipe to one side of his toothless mouth so that the smoke should not trouble the little fellow. A devil of a kid, and how fetching he was! That ugly, lanky creature of a daughter-in-law was like all the other women of his family: they gave birth to offspring that didn't resemble their parents at all. The grandfather, fondling the little boy, thought of the future. He showed him to the comrades of his youth, who were becoming scarcer and scarcer with time, and prophesied the days to come.

"This little fellow will be one of us: his only house will be the boat. Before he's cut all his teeth he'll know how to handle an oar."

But before the infant cut his teeth, Tío Paloma met with the most unexpected event in all his life. He was told at the tavern that Tono had rented certain rice lands near Saler, the property of a woman in Valencia; and when that night he confronted his son, he was amazed to see that the man did not deny the crime.

When had anybody ever seen a Paloma with a master? The family had always lived free, as every son of God

must live who has any self-respect, seeking their sustenance in the air or in the water, hunting and fishing. His masters had been the king and that blunt warrior who was a Captain General in Valencia; masters who dwelt far off, who did not oppress, and who could be tolerated because of their greatness. But a son of his, renting land from one of those idle, stylish city women, and every year bringing her in cash a part of his labor! What an idea! He was ready to go to talk to that woman and undo the contract! The Palomas would serve nobody as long as there was anything left to eat in the lake: even if it was only frogs.

But the old man's surprise grew greater than ever before Tono's unexpected show of resistance. He had thought the matter over well and was not disposed to retreat. He was thinking of his wife, of that little boy whom she carried in her arms, and it filled him with ambition. Who were they? Lake beggars, living like savages in the cabin, with no other food than the creatures of the canals, and compelled to flee like criminals before the guards whenever they shot a bird to put in the pot. Nothing but parasites of the hunters, eating meat only when the strangers allowed them to take a share of their provisions. And this poverty continued from fathers to sons, as if they were to live forever moored to the mud of the Albufera, with no more life or ambition than that of a toad, which thinks itself happy in the reeds because its finds insects on the surface of the water.

No; he was rebelling, he wished to lift the family out of its wretched prostration; to work not only for the purpose of getting enough to eat, but to lay something aside. The advantages of rice cultivation must be appreciated:

little work and great profit. It was a veritable blessing from heaven: nothing in the world offered more. You plant in June and harvest in September; a little fertilizer and a little work,—in all, three months: you reap the harvest, then the waters of the lake, swollen by the winter rains, cover the fields and, then, all done until the next year! You save what you earn, and during the rest of the months you fish in the sunlight and hunt on the sly to keep your family provided for. What more could be desired? . . . . His grandfather had been a poor man, and after a dog's life had accomplished only the building of this cabin, where they all dwelt in everlasting smoke. His father, whom he respected so much, had not been able to lay aside even a crumb for his old age. Let them permit him to work as he saw fit, and his son, his little Tonet, would be a rich man, he would cultivate fields whose vast extent would be lost to the view, and upon the site of the cabin perhaps in time there would arise the finest house in all Palmar. His father was wrong to get angry because his descendants cultivated the earth. It was better to be a farmer than to lead a wandering life about the lake, often suffering hunger and exposing oneself to a bullet from one of the guards of the Dehesa.

Tío Paloma, white with rage at his son's talk, stared fixedly at a pole lying close to the wall, and his hands moved toward it as if to seize it and crack his son's head with a stout blow. Had such a rebellion occurred in earlier days he surely would have broken his son's head for it, for in his old-fashioned conception of a father's authority he considered that he had the right to do so.

But he looked at his daughter-in-law with his grandson in her arms, and these two beings seemed to increase his

son's stature, bringing him up to his own level. He was a father, one of his equals. For the first time he realized that Tono was no longer the boy who had made supper in the olden days, lowering his head in terror at a single glance. And quivering with rage because he could not strike him as he used to when he committed some error in the boat, he vented his protest in loud snorts. Very well: everybody to his own taste; the one to the lake and the other to his labor of flattening the soil. They would live together, since there was no other way out of it. His years did not permit him to sleep out on the middle of the lake, for he had got rheumatism in his old age; but aside from this, it would be as if they did not know each other. Ay, if the original Paloma,—the boatman of Suchet,—could lift his head and see the family disgrace! . . . .

The first year was one of unending torment for the old man. Entering the cabin at night he would encounter farming implements side by side with fishing apparatus. One day he stumbled across a plow that Tono had brought from the land to repair during the evening, and it produced upon him the effect of a monstrous dragon stretched out in the center of the cabin. All these blades of iron made him shiver with rage. It was enough merely to see a sickle lying a few paces away from one of his nets, for him to imagine directly that the curved blade would rise of its own volition and cut all his property; he would scold his daughter-in-law for her carelessness, ordering her at the top of his lungs to keep those *farmer's* implements away—way away from his own. On all sides were objects that suggested the cultivation of the land. And this, in the Paloma's cabin, where no steel had been known other than that of the knives used to clean fish! . . . .

Good Lord, it was enough to make a man burst with rage!

During the sowing season, when the lands were dry enough to plow, Tono would come home perspiring, after driving the hired horses all day long. His father would walk around him, sniffing with malignant delight, and afterwards would dash to the tavern, where his comrades of the good old days would be dozing, glass in hand. Gentlemen, a great piece of news! . . . . His son smelled horsy. Hee, hee! A horse on the island of Palmar! Now the world had truly gone topsy-turvy.

Apart from these outbursts, Tío Paloma maintained a cold, aloof attitude amid his son's family. He would come in at night with his *monòt* on his arm, a basket made of net and wooden hoops, containing some eels, and would shove his daughter-in-law aside with his foot, to make room for himself before the hearth. He prepared his own supper. Sometimes he would roll the eels around a stick and make them *al ast* (on the spit) broiling them on all sides patiently over the flames. At others he would hunt up his old pot in the boat, containing reserve provisions, and would cook *en such* an enormous tench, or fastidiously make a *sebollá,* mixing onions with eels, and using such large quantities that it seemed as though he were preparing a meal for the entire town.

The voracity of this old, wizened fellow was that of all of Albufera's old sons. He ate his heavy meal at night, when he returned to the cabin; seated on the floor, in a corner, with his pot between his knees, he would spend hours at a time, in silence, moving his old goat-like mouth from side to side, swallowing enormous quantities of food,—so much that it seemed impossible for the human stomach to contain it.

He ate his own food,—that which he had captured during the day,—and paid no attention to what his son's family ate, offering them nothing from his pot. Let everyone fatten upon his own labors! His eyes would glitter with malicious satisfaction when he would see upon the family table, as their only food, a pan of rice, while he picked the bones of some bird that he had shot in the sedge while the guards were far away.

Tono let his father do as he liked. Using compulsion on the old man was not to be thought of, so the isolation between him and the family continued. Little Tonet was the sole bond of union. Many times the grandson would approach Tío Paloma, as if attracted by the savory odor of his pot.

*"Tin, pobret, tin,"* the old man would say, compassionately, as if he beheld the child in the greatest misery. "Take this, my poor child. Here."

And he would present him with a succulent, meaty thigh of a coot, smiling to see how the tot devoured it.

Whenever he cooked some *all y pebre* (fish stew) with his boon companions at the tavern, he would take along his grandson without saying a word to the parents.

At other times there would be a bigger feast. On a morning Tío Paloma, feeling the itch for adventure, would have embarked with some companion as old as himself for the thickets of the Dehesa. A long wait, stretched out upon their bellies, spying upon the guards, who were unaware of their presence. As soon as the rabbits appeared leaping through the stalks of the underbrush, fire!—two of them in the bag, and run for the boat, afterwards laughing, from the middle of the lake, at the guards dashing about here and there along the shore

hunting in vain for the poachers. These bold stunts rejuvenated Tío Paloma. It was a treat to hear him, at night, while the game was being eaten in the tavern by comrades who had paid for the wine with which to wash it down, boasting about his great exploit. Not a youth of the present day was able to do as much! And when the more prudent spoke to him of the law and its penalties, the boatman's chest swelled proudly, though it was sunken with the years and the constant poling. The guards were nothing but tramps, who took that sort of a job because they didn't care to do real work; and the men who leased the hunting were a band of robbers, who wanted everything for themselves. . . . The Albufera belonged to him and to all the rest of the fisher-folk. If they had been born in a palace, they would have been monarchs. If the Lord had caused them to be born there, it was for some purpose. All the rest was a heap of lies invented by men.

And after devouring his supper, when there was scarcely any wine left in the jugs, Tío Paloma would contemplate his grandson asleep on his knees, and would show him to his friends. This little fellow would some day grow into a real son of the Albufera. His grandfather would see to his education, so he wouldn't follow in the evil footsteps of his father. He would use the musket with astounding skill, he would know the bed of the lake like an eel, and when his grandfather should die, all who came to hunt would find in the boat another Paloma, but one in the strength of youth, such as he himself was in the days when even the queen came to sit down in his boat, laughing at his jokes.

Apart from these moments of tenderness, the boat-

man continued his smoldering animosity against his son. He did not care to see the cursed lands that he cultivated, but he had them ever present in his mind's eye, and would laugh with diabolic joy on learning that Tono's affairs were going badly. The first year his fields were spoiled by nitre, just when the rice was beginning to mature, and the harvest came near being lost. Tío Paloma repeated the story of this misfortune to everybody, with the greatest delight; but when he noted how sad the family was, and saw how they had to skimp because of the large expenditures that had gone to waste, he felt a certain compassion and even broke the silence to counsel his son. Had he not yet been convinced that he was a man of the water, and not a farmer? He should leave the fields to the inland folk, who were of old used to tilling them. He was the son of a fisherman, and must return to the nets.

Tono, however, replied with ill-humored grunts, indicating his determination to go ahead, and the old man subsided into his silent hatred. Ah, the obstinate fellow! .... From then on, he called down all sorts of calamities upon his son's lands, as a means of conquering his proud resistance. He made no inquiries at home, but as his little skiff passed the large vessels coming from the direction of Saler, he would inquire as to the progress of the harvest and would feel a certain satisfaction when he was told that it would be a bad year. His obstinate son would die of hunger. He would even have to come to him on his knees and beg for the key to the old eel-pond with the roof of broken straw that he had near Palmar.

The storms at the end of summer filled him with delight. He longed to have the cataracts of heaven burst

open; to have that stream of Torrente that poured into the lake of Albufera, supplying it with water, overflow the place from shore to shore; to have the lake, as sometimes occurred, flood over and submerge the ears that were ripe for harvest. The farmers would die of hunger; but there would be plenty of fish in the lake just the same, and he would have the satisfaction of beholding his son starving, begging his aid.

Fortunately for Tono, the wishes of the malevolent old fisherman were not fulfilled. The years immediately following were favorable; a certain comfort reigned in the cabin, and the ardent toiler foresaw, almost in the light of a happiness impossible of realization, a time when he might be tilling lands that were his own, and which would not carry with them the obligation to surrender to another almost the entire product.

A shadow clouded the family life. Tonet was growing up and his mother was sad. The boy would go to the lake with his grandfather; after, when he was older, he would accompany his father to the fields, and the poor woman would have to spend the day all alone in the cabin.

She was thinking of the future, and the coming loneliness filled her with fear. Ah, if she only had other children! . . . . It was a daughter for which she prayed so fervently to God. But the daughter did not come; she could not come, according to Tío Paloma. His daughter-in-law was unwell; women's trouble. She had been delivered of her child by women neighbors of Palmar, leaving her in such a condition, according to the old man, that she could never bear again. This was why she always seemed so ill, as white as paper, unable to be on her feet

for very long at a time, and on some days dragging herself along, with groans that she swallowed with her tears so as not to bother the men.

Tono was eager to fulfill his wife's desires. He had no objections to a girl in the house; she could help the sick woman. And together they made a trip to the city, bringing back with them a little girl of six years,—a timid, wild, ugly creature whom they had taken from the orphan asylum. Her name was Visanteta; but everybody, so that she should not forget her origin, and with that unconscious cruelty of coarse, unrefined spirits, called her La Borda.

The boatman grumbled with indignation. Another mouth to feed! . . . . Little Tonet, who was now ten, found this little girl quite to his taste, inflicting upon her all his whims and exactions of a pampered, only son.

La Borda found in the cabin no other affection than that of the sickly woman, who grew daily weaker and more wracked with pain. The unhappy woman deluded herself into believing that she had a daughter, and in the afternoon, seating the girl in the doorway of the cabin, face to the sun, she would comb her red hair, well anointed with oil.

The girl was like a frisky, obedient puppy that enlivened the cabin with its scampering here and there, resigned to all fatigue, submissive to all of Tonet's mischievous pranks. With a supreme effort of her arms she would drag along a pitcher as tall as herself, filled with water from the Dehesa, from the canal to the house. She would run all over the town at all hours on errands for her new mother, and at table she ate with lowered eyes, not daring to raise her spoon until the rest were half-way

through the meal. Tío Paloma, with his silence and his ferocious glances, terrified her. At night, as the two rooms were occupied respectively by husband and wife, and by Tonet and his grandfather, she would sleep beside the hearth, in the middle of the cabin, upon the mud that oozed through the canvas that served as her bed, covering herself with the nets to keep off the draughts that blew down the chimney and through the cracked door gnawed full of holes by rats.

Her only pleasant hours came during those afternoons when all was calm and the men were either on the lake or in the fields; then she would sit down with her mother to sew sails or weave nets before the cabin door. The two conversed with the neighbors, amid the deep silence of the solitary, crooked grass-covered street, over which the hens strutted and the ducks waddled, cackling and flapping their damp white wings in the sunlight.

Tonet no longer attended the town school,—a damp cottage supported by the city council, where boys and girls, in an ill-smelling gathering, spent the day whining the alphabet or chanting prayers.

He was every inch a man, as his grandfather said, when he felt his muscles to see how hard they were and thumped the child's chest with his fist. At his age Tío Paloma had already been able to live on what he had himself caught, and had shot at every species of bird that flies in the Albufera.

The boy gladly followed his grandfather on his expeditions over land and water. He learned how to handle the pole and sped like lightning in one of Tío Paloma's little boats; when hunters came from Valencia, he would crouch in the prow of the boat and help his grandfather

manage the sail, leaping to the bank at difficult moments to grasp the rope and drag the vessel in tow.

Then came the development of his skill in hunting. His grandfather's musket, a veritable arquebuse, which was easily to be distinguished from all other guns in Albufera by its report, he learned to handle with relative facility. Tío Paloma loaded heavily, and the first shots made the boy stagger; he all but fell head over heels into the bottom of the boat. Little by little he tamed the old beast and soon was bringing down coots, to the great delight of his grandfather.

That was the kind of education boys should receive. If the old man had his way, Tonet would eat nothing that he had not shot or fished with his own hands.

But after a year of training Tonet in this rude fashion, Tío Paloma noted a great slackening of interest on the part of his pupil. Tonet was fond of discharging shots and liked fishing. What he did not seem to be so fond of was getting up before daybreak and spending all day long with his arms stretched out moving the pole and pulling like a horse at the rope.

The boatman saw clearly that what his grandson detested, with instinctive repulsion that awoke his most spirited resistance, was work. In vain Tío Paloma spoke to him of the great fishing they'd do the following day at *el Recatì, el Rincón de la olla,* or some other point of Albufera. No sooner did the boatman turn his head than his grandson had disappeared. He preferred to scamper over the Dehesa with the good-for-nothings of the neighborhood, to stretch himself out beneath a pine and spend the hours listening to the chirping of the sparrows in the

tufted crests or watching the white butterflies and the bronze bumble-bees flit about in the wild flowers.

The grandfather threatened, but to no avail. He tried to spank the boy, but Tonet, like a wild animal, would escape from him and look on the ground for rocks with which to defend himself. The old fellow became resigned to making his trips on the lake alone, as before.

He had spent his whole life working; his son Tono, although led astray by his agricultural enthusiasm, was stronger even than he for hard tasks. Then whom could that little terror have taken after? Lord! Where had he come from, with his endurance that was proof against all fatigue, with his fondness for lying about idle, basking for hours in the sun like a toad on the canal bank? . . . .

Everything in that world beyond which the old man had never set foot was undergoing a transformation. The Albufera was being entirely altered by the men with their cultivating, and families were being disfigured, as if the traditions of the lake were being lost forever. The sons of the boatmen were becoming serfs of the land; the grandsons went armed with rocks to throw at their grandfathers; on the lake could be seen great barges laden with coal, while the rice fields extending in every direction, were invading the lake, devouring the water, and were already gnawing at the forest, cutting wide swaths in it. Ay, Lord! To behold all this, to witness the destruction of a world that he had looked upon as eternal! It would be better to die!

Isolated from his own, with no love other than the deep affection he felt for his mother, the Albufera, he would inspect it, review it daily, as if in his eyes, the

keen, astute eyes of an old man, he was storing up all the water of the lake and the countless trees of the Dehesa.

They did not hew down a pine in the forest without his noting it at once from a great distance, from the center of the lake. Another one! . . . . The gap that the fallen tree left in the foliage of the trees near-by filled him with anguish, as if he were gazing into the hollow of a grave. He cursed the lessees of the Albufera,—insatiable thieves. The people of Palmar stole wood from the forest, it was true; in their hearths burned only twigs and branches of the Dehesa, they were satisfied with the dead wood, with the withered and fallen trunks; but these invisible gentlemen, who appeared only by proxy, in the guards' carbines and the tricks of the law, struck down with the greatest nonchalance the veterans of the forest,—giants that had gazed down upon him when as a youngster he crawled about the boats, and which were already huge trees when his father, the first Paloma, dwelt in a savage Albufera, killing with cane-stalks the snakes that swarmed on the river-bank,—more agreeable creatures than the men of nowadays.

In his sadness before the downfall of ancient customs and views, he sought the wildest spots of the lake,—those to which the anxieties of exploitation had not yet come.

The sight of an old water-wheel would send a shudder up his spine, and with deep emotion he contemplated the black, decayed wheel, the chipped buckets, filled with straw, out of which some rats jumped as he approached. These were the ruins of the dead Albufera; they were the souvenirs, as he himself was, of a better time.

When he wished to rest he landed on the plain of

Sancha, with its lagoons of jelly-like water and its high beds of rushes; here he would contemplate the green, somber landscape, in which there still seemed to quiver the sounds of the legendary monster's tightening coils, and he rejoiced to think that there yet existed something that was free from the voracity of modern men,—among whom he could count, ay! his son.

## III

WHEN Tío Paloma desisted from the rude, strenuous education of his grandson, the latter breathed more easily.

He was tired of accompanying his father to the fields of Saler, and thought uneasily of his future when he beheld Tòni deep in the mud of the rice plantations, amid leeches and toads, his feet wet and his body burned by the sun. His lazy instincts then revealed themselves. No; he would not follow in his father's footsteps; he would not work the fields. To be a carabineer and stretch out at ease on the beach, or to be a civil guard such as those who came from Ruzafa with the yellow belts and the white queues seemed to him far preferable to cultivating rice, sweating in the water with one's legs swollen by bites.

The first few times that he had accompanied his grandfather through the Albufera he had found the life much to his taste. He liked to wander about the lake, to sail without any fixed goal, passing from one canal to another, or stopping in the middle of the lake to converse with the fishermen. Sometimes he would leap to the little islands of sedge and excite the lonely bulls with his whistling. At other times, he would enter the Dehesa, pick berries in the brambles, and poke the rabbit burrows, hunting for a young rabbit inside. His grandfather would applaud him when he would catch a *fòcha* or a *collvert* asleep between

wind and water, making it his own with certain aim.

He was fond, too, of lying on his back in the boat for hours, listening to his grandfather tell tales of long ago. Tìo Paloma recalled the most notable events of his life; his conversations with the great; certain smuggling expeditions of his early youth when he was shot at; and going still further back in his memories, he spoke of his father, the first Paloma, repeating what the latter had in his day told to him.

This boatman of olden days had also seen great things without ever having left the place. And Tío Paloma told his grandson about the trip made by Carlos IV and his queen to the Albufera, long before he himself had been born. This did not prevent Tonet from describing the large tents that had been set up among the pines of the Dehesa for the royal banquet, floored with costly carpets and topped with pennants; the music, the packs of hounds, the lackeys in powdered wigs in charge of the provision carts. The King dressed as a hunter, surrounded himself with Albufera's rustic marksmen, almost naked, and carrying old arquebuses; he admired their prowess while Maria Luisa strolled through the leafy woods arm in arm with Don Manuel Godoy.

And the old man, recalling that famous visit, wound up by singing the verses that his father had taught him:

> Debajo de un pino verde
> le dijo la reina al rey:
> "Mucho te quiero, Carlitos,
> pero más quiero á Manuel."[1]

[1] (Beneath a green pine-tree
The queen said to the king:
"I am fond of you, my Charley,
But it is Manuel that I love.")

His quivering voice, as he sang, assumed a malicious expression, and he accompanied every verse with sly winks, as if it were only a few days before that the folk of Albufera had made up the stanza in revenge for an expedition which, with all its pomp, seemed to insult the passive misery of the fishermen.

But this epoch, so joyous to Tonet, was of short duration. His grandfather began to be exacting and tyrannical with him. Seeing that the boy had become expert in managing the boat, he no longer allowed him to wander about as he liked. Mornings he would capture him and make him go fishing with him. The boy would have to carry along the *mornells* of the previous night,—large net bags at the bottom of which the eels would be ensnared,—and lower them anew: work taxing his strength, forcing him to stand on the gunwale of the boat, his back burning in the fire of the sun.

His grandfather would watch the work without stirring to lend a hand. On the way back to town he would stretch himself out in the bottom of the boat like an invalid, leaving the steering to his grandson, who poled the boat like one exhausted.

The boatmen, from a distance, would salute the wrinkled head of Tío Paloma just visible over the gunwale. Clever old bird! How comfortably he spent the day! He took it as easy as the priest of Palmar while his poor grandson sweated and worked. The grandfather would reply, as seriously as a professor: "That's the way to learn! My father taught me the same way!"

Later on came spearing: wandering over the lake from sunset to sunrise, in the darkness of winter nights. Tonet

would keep watch at the prow over the bunch of dry grasses that burned like a torch, throwing over the black waters a wide blood stain. The grandfather stood at the poop, grasping the *fitora*: a heavy iron fork with pointed prongs,—a terrible weapon,—which, once plunged could be withdrawn only at the cost of great effort and horrible destruction. The light penetrated to the bottom of the lake. There one could see the shell bed, the aquatic plants, a whole world of mystery, invisible during the day; the water was so transparent that the boat seemed to be floating in the air with no support whatever. The creatures of the lake, deceived by the light, would blindly cluster around the red brightness, and Tío Paloma,—zas!—never thrust his *fitora* into the waters without pulling out a big fish that lashed its tail desperately at the end of the sharp trident.

At first this fishing roused Tonet's enthusiasm; but little by little the sport grew to be slavery, and he began to hate the lake, gazing yearningly at the white cottages of Palmar, which stood out against the dark lines of the islands of sedge.

He looked back enviously to his earliest days, when all he had to do was go to school, and when he used to play about the streets, sometimes hearing the women tell one another what a handsome child he was, and congratulating his mother.

There he had been master of his life. His sickly mother spoke to him with a pale smile, finding an excuse for all his pranks, and La Borda supported him with the meekness of the inferior creature admiring the strong. The gamins that swarmed about the cabins recognized him as

their leader, and they would go in a gang along the canal bank, throwing stones at the ducks, who fled quacking amid the women's shouts and cries.

The break with his grandfather meant a return to his former indolence. No longer would he leave Palmar before dawn to remain on the lake until nightfall. The whole day was his very own in the town, where there remained no men other than the priest in the presbytery, the teacher in the school and the chief of the coast guards strutting along the banks with his fierce mustache and his red, toper's nose, while the women made nets before the cabin doors, leaving the street to the mercy of the little tots.

Tonet, emancipated from labor, renewed former friendships. He had two chums who had been born in cabins close to his own: Neleta and Sangonera.

The girl had no father, and her mother was an old eel-woman of the city market, who at midnight would load her baskets upon the barge called "the eel cart." In the afternoon she would return to Palmar, her soft, billowy, obese body exhausted by the daily journey and the quarrels and chafferings of the Fish Market. The poor woman would go to sleep before nightfall, so that she might get up with the stars and follow this abnormal life that left her no time to attend to her daughter. The latter grew up with no more care than she received from the neighbors, and especially Tonet's mother, who often gave her things to eat, as if she were her own daughter. But the girl was less docile than La Borda, and was far more eager to follow Tonet in his escapades than to remain for hours at a time learning the various points about net-weaving.

Sangonera bore the same nick-name as his father, the

most noted drunkard in all Albufera,—an old sot who seemed to have been shrivelled up by alcohol, for many years past. When he was left a widower, with little *Sangonereta*[1] as his only child, he gave himself up to drink, and the village folk, beholding how eagerly he sucked at his favorite beverages, compared him to a leech (sanguijela), thus creating his nick-name.

He would disappear from Palmar for weeks. From time to time it would be learned that he was tramping through the cities of the mainland begging from the wealthy farmers of Catarroja and Masanasa, and sleeping off his sprees in the straw-lofts. Whenever he spent much time in Palmar there would disappear during the night the net-bags hung up in the canals; the *mornells* would be emptied of eels before the owners arrived, and more than one neighbor, on counting his ducks, cried to heaven that one was missing. The coast guard would cough loudly and glance in Old Sangonera's direction, as if he were ready to pierce the drunkard's eyes with the points of his formidable mustache; but the drunkard protested, calling all the saints, for lack of more reliable testimony, to witness his innocence. It was the malevolence of the village folk, who were bent upon ruining him, as if he didn't have enough to bear with his poverty, which compelled him to live in the most wretched cabin of the place! And in order to placate the stern representative of the law, who more than once had drunk in his company, but who, outside of the tavern did not recognize anybody, he would go off again on a trip over the other shore of the Albufera, not returning to Palmar for several weeks.

[1] Little Sangonera.

His son refused to follow him on these expeditions. Born in a shanty, into which bread never came, he had been compelled from childhood to get his food by his wits, and rather than accompany his father he chose to separate from him, so as not to have to share with him the product of his own skill.

When the fishermen would sit down to a meal, they would catch sight of a gloomy shadow walking back and forth in front of the cabin door; finally it would take up a position at one side, its head lowered and its gaze directed within, like a young bull preparing to attack. This was Sangonereta, who would be meditating upon his hunger with a hypocritical expression of submissiveness and shame, while his roguish eyes sparkled with the desire to make off with everything before him.

The vision would produce an effect upon the families. Poor boy! And catching a half-gnawed coot bone, a piece of tench or a crumb that would be thrown to him, he would manage to satisfy his hunger from door to door. If he noticed the dogs call to one another with a muffled barking and dash toward any of the Palmar taverns, he would run along too, as if he were in the secret. It would be hunters who were making their *paella,* gentlemen from Valencia who had come to the lake to eat an *all y pebre*; and when the strangers, seated before the little tavern table, had to defend themselves, by kicks, between one spoonful and another, from the milling of the famished dogs, they would discover that they were being aided by the tattered urchin, who, as a result of his smiles and his frightening away of the fierce dogs, would at length appropriate the remnants of the meal. A guard had given him an old barracks cap; the magistrate of the town had

presented him with the trousers of a huntsman who had drowned in the reeds; and his feet, always bare, were as strong as his hands were weak, for his hands had never touched the pole or the oar.

Sangonera, filthy, famished, forever thrusting his hand under his grimy cap to scratch furiously away at his head, enjoyed great prestige among the youngsters. Tonet was the stronger, and could easily thrash him, but none the less he recognized his own inferiority and did everything that Sangonera told him. It was the prestige of one who is able to live by his own wits, without asking aid of anyone. The younger element admired him with no uncertain envy at beholding him live a life free from the fears of paternal correction and free of all obligations. And besides, his mischief-making was fascinating, and the boys, who in their own cabins would get a good slap for the least fault, thought themselves more manly when they went in the company of that rascal, who looked upon everything as his own, and knew how to turn it to good advantage, never finding anything left in the canal boats without appropriating it.

He had declared war against the creatures of the air, since it required less labor to capture them than to catch those of the lake. He would hunt, with ingenious methods of his own devising, the so-called Moorish sparrows which infest the Albufera and are feared by the farmers as an evil pest because they devour a large part of the rice harvest. His best season was summer, when *fumarells* abounded,—little gulls of the lake, which he caught in a net.

In this work he was aided by Tío Paloma's grandson. They were partners in this business, as Tonet gravely

declared, and the two boys would spend hours watching on the banks of the lake, pulling at the line and imprisoning the unwary birds in the net. When they had caught a good supply, Sangonera, hardy traveler, would take the road to Valencia, carrying the net-bag on his back, while inside the *fumarells* flapped their dark wings and in their desperate writhings showed their white paunches. The rascal would pass along the streets near the Fish Market, crying his birds, and the city gamins would run to purchase the *fumarells* and send them flying over the crossways, with a line of twine tied to their legs.

On his return there would be trouble between the partners, and commercial rupture. It was impossible to get any accounting from such a rogue. Tonet got tired of thrashing Sangonera without receiving an *ochavo* of the proceeds from the sale; but ever credulous and duped by the rascal's wiles, he would return in quest of him to the ramshackle, doorless cabin where he slept alone for the greater part of the year.

When Sangonera passed his eleventh year he began to abandon his little friends. His parasitical instinct made him frequent the church, since this was the most direct road by which to introduce himself into the vicar's home. In a town like Palmar the priest was as poor as any of the fishermen, but Sangonera was tempted by the communion wine which he had heard highly praised in the taverns. Besides, during the summer days, when the lake boiled beneath the sun, the little church seemed to him like an enchanted palace, with its shadowy light filtering through the green windows, its whitewashed walls and the pavement of red stones exhaling the dampness of the marshy soil.

Tío Paloma, who despised the rogue because he was an enemy of the boating-life, received the news of his new affiliations with disgust. Ah, the shameless tramp! How well he knew his business!

When the vicar would go to Valencia, the rascal would carry to the boat the wide kerchief, one of those known as herb kerchiefs, filled with clothes, and he would follow the craft along the banks, taking such affectionate farewell of the priest that one would imagine he was never to see him again. He helped the curate's servant with the household chores; he would fetch wood from the Dehesa, and water from the springs that rose in the lake, and he would be as excited as a hungry cat expecting dainties when, in the tiny room that served as the sacristy, alone and in silence, he would devour the food left over on the vicar's table. Mornings, pulling at the rope of the bell that awoke the town, he felt proud of his position. The encouraging pats on the shoulder with which the vicar encouraged his activities seemed to him signs of distinction that placed him above his companions.

But this desire to dwell in the shadow of the church would at times grow weak, yielding to some nostalgia for his former vagabond life. Then he would hunt up Neleta and Tonet, and together they would again take up their games and make forays along the banks, going as far as the Dehesa, which to his simple companions seemed the end of the world.

One autumn afternoon Tonet's mother sent them to the forest for wood. Instead of bothering her with their noisy play inside the cabin, they could be useful to her, fetching her some faggots, since winter was approaching.

The three went on the trip. The Dehesa was in blossom.

and as fragrant as a garden. The bushes, under the caress of a sun that was as warm as in summer, were full of flowers, and above them insects shone bright as gold, flitting about with a subdued buzzing. The twisted, ageless pines stirred with a stately murmur, and under the vaults formed by their wide tops a soft shade prevailed, like the shadows in the naves of an immense cathedral. From time to time a sunbeam fell between two tree-trunks, as if coming in through a window.

Tonet and Neleta, whenever they penetrated into the Dehesa, felt dominated by the same emotion. They were afraid, without knowing of what or of whom, imagining themselves in the enchanted palace of an invisible giant who might show himself at any moment.

They sauntered along over the winding paths of the forest, now hidden by the foliage that waved above their heads, now reaching the crest of a dune, from which, through the colonnade of trunks, could be seen the vast mirror of the lake, speckled by boats as tiny as flies.

Their feet slipped along the ground, which was covered with moss. At the sound of their steps, at the least of their shouts, the thickets would quiver with the mad running of invisible creatures. They were rabbits taking to flight. From afar sounded drowsily the bells of the cows which were grazing off in the direction of the sea.

The youngsters seemed to be intoxicated by the calm and the perfumes of that serene afternoon. When, on winter days, they entered the forest the leafless, solitary thickets, the east wind that blew from the sea and froze their hands, the tragic look of the Dehesa in the gray light of a clouded sky made them gather their bundles of wood quickly on the very fringe of the forest and run all

the way back to Palmar. But on that afternoon they went ahead confidently, eager to chase through the entire wood, even if they reached the end of the world.

One surprise followed another. Neleta, with her feminine instincts of self-adornment, instead of looking for dry wood cut off twigs of myrtle, waving them above her tangled hair. Afterward she gathered twigs of mint and other fragrant plants, covered with flowerets, which intoxicated her with their pungent perfume. Tonet picked wild bluebells, and weaving a garland of them, he arranged it over Neleta's dishevelled hair, laughing to see how closely she resembled the cherubs painted upon the altars of the church at Palmar. Sangonera searched everywhere, like a glutton, for something profitable amid this glorious, perfumed nature. He swallowed the red clusters of shepherd's cherries, and with a strength born only of hunger, he tore up from the ground the palmetto roots, looking for the *margalló,* the bitter stalk in whose pulpy folds he found the tender, sweet-tasting palm-seed.

In the bare spots of the forest, called *mallaes,*—low lands denuded of trees because they were submerged under water during the winter, fluttered the darning-needles and butterflies. As the children ran along they were pricked by the brambles and torn by the reeds, which were as sharp as lances, but they laughed at the smarting pain and ran on their way, amazed by the forest's beauty. On the paths they always found short worms, thick and bright-colored, as if they were animated flowers crawling along with nervous undulation. They picked up these caterpillars, admiring them as mysterious beings whose nature they could not guess, and then placed them back on the ground, crawling along on all fours after them, until they

slowly wriggled into the thicket. The dragon-flies sent them scurrying here and there, and all three admired the nervous darting of the most common, red type, called *caballets,* and of the *marotas,* attired like fairies, with wings of silver, green backs and breasts covered with gold.

Wandering at random through the middle of the forest, farther than they had ever penetrated before, they noticed all at once that the look of the landscape was changing. They had plunged into the thickest of the glens until they found themselves in a twilight gloom. An incessant roar kept sounding ever nearer. It was the sea, lashing the beach on the other side of the chain of dunes which bounded the horizon.

The pines were not straight and imposing like those on the lake side. Their trunks were twisted; the foliage was almost white and the crowns bent downward. All the trees grew obliquely in the same direction, as if an invisible tempest were blowing amid the deep calm of the afternoon. The wind from the sea, during the great storms, tortured this side of the forest, giving it a funereal aspect.

The children turned back. They had heard of this part of the Dehesa, the most savage and dangerous section of the forest. The silence and the motionless thickets filled them with fear. Here it was that the big snakes ran into hiding when chased by the guards of the Dehesa; it was here that the wild bulls which strayed from the flock went grazing, obliging the hunters to load their muskets with coarse salt so as to frighten them without killing them.

Sangonera, as the one who was best acquainted with

the Dehesa, guided his party toward the lake, but the palmettos that he found on the road forced him to turn aside. until he lost his way. The afternoon was drawing to a close and Neleta grew scared when she saw the forest darken. The two boys laughed at her. The pines formed a huge house: it grew dark there as it did in their cabins, long before the sunset, but outside of the forest there still remained an hour of daylight. There was no hurry. And they continued their search for *margallóns*. The girl was calmed by the palm-seeds that Tonet gave her, and which she sucked at as she lingered on the way. Whenever she found herself alone at a bend in the road, she would run to catch up with them.

Now night was really falling. . . . Sangonera, as one who knew the Dehesa intimately, said so. No longer did the sound of the herd bells come from afar. They must get quickly out of the forest, but not before gathering some wood, so that they should not be scolded when they returned home. At the foot of the pines, among the bushes, they hunted for dry twigs. Hurriedly they made three small bundles, and almost gropingly set out on their way. They had gone only a few steps when darkness was complete. About where the lake of Albufera should be there was a glow like that of a huge fire on the point of dying down, but within the forest the trunks and the bushes barely stood out, deeper shadows against the fearsome background.

Sangonera lost his serenity, uncertain where they were going. They had strayed from the road; they blundered into thorny bushes that scratched their legs. Neleta sobbed with fear, and suddenly cried out and fell. She had stumbled against the roots of a pine tree that had

been hewn close to the ground, and had hurt her foot. Sangonera suggested going ahead and leaving behind that cry-baby who could only whine. The girl choked back her tears, as if she were afraid of disturbing the silence of the forest, and attracting the horrible beasts that lived in the darkness, and Tonet, under his breath, threatened Sangonera with fabulous numbers of thrashings if he did not stay with them as their guide.

They walked along slowly, feeling out each step ahead until suddenly they no longer stumbled upon bushes, coming out on the slippery moss of the paths. But then, Tonet, in speaking, got no reply from his boy companion, who had been walking ahead.

*"Sangonera! Sangonera!"*

A noise of broken branches, of bushes scraped in flight, as if a wild animal were making his escape, was the only reply. Tonet shouted with rage. Oh, the big scoundrel! He had fled to get out of the forest sooner: he did not want to stay with his chums and have to help Neleta.

Left by themselves, the two children felt the sudden collapse of the little confidence they had in themselves. Sangonera, with his vagabond experience, had seemed to them a great help. Neleta, terrified, and forgetful of all prudence, wailed hysterically, and her cries resounded through the silence of the wood, which seemed so vast. His chum's fear aroused Tonet's energy. Then he had put his arm around the girl's shoulder, held her up, encouraged her, and asked her if she were able to walk, if she were willing to follow him, and they had kept on and on, though the poor fellow did not know where they were going.

For a long time they stuck together; she sobbing, he

trembling before the unknown, but determined to overcome it.

Something sticky and cold brushed by their faces; perhaps a bat; and this touch, which sent a shudder coursing through them, woke them from their depressing inertia. They began to walk hurriedly along, stumbling and getting up, becoming entangled in the bushes, bumping into trees, trembling at the sounds that spurred them on in their flight. The two thought of the same thing, but instinctively they concealed their thoughts from each other so as not to add to their fear. The recollection of Sancha was fixed in their memory. Before their mind's eye passed in rapid procession all the legends of the lake that they had heard at night beside the cabin hearth, and as their hands struck against the trunks they imagined that they had touched the wrinkled, icy skin of huge reptiles. The cries of the coots sounding from afar in the sedge of the lake, seemed to them the groans of murdered people. Their mad careening through the bushes, snapping off twigs, trampling over plants, disturbed mysterious creatures who also ran through the underbrush kicking up the dry leaves.

They reached a wide clearing, without being able to determine in just what part of the interminable wood they were. In this open space the darkness was not so intense. Above extended the sky, of a deep blue, shimmering with light, like a vast canvas stretched above the black masses of the forest that surrounded the plain. The two youngsters stopped in this luminous, tranquil island. They felt powerless to go any farther. They trembled with fear before the deep grove that moved on all sides like a tide of black waves.

They sat down, tightly clutching each other, as if the contact of their bodies inspired them with confidence. Neleta no longer was crying. Exhausted with pain and fatigue, she leaned her head against her friend's shoulder, groaning faintly. Tonet looked in every direction, as if, more than by the gloom of the wood, he were frightened in that crepuscular light, in which every moment he imagined he beheld the silhouette of some wild beast, the foe of strayed children. The song of the cuckoo broke the silence; the frogs of a near-by pool, which had stopped croaking as soon as the children arrived, recovered their confidence and returned to their sing-song; the persistent, bothersome mosquitos buzzed about their heads, their wings gleaming a little in the dark twilight.

Little by little the two children recovered their calm. It was not at all bad there: they might spend the night in that place. And the warmth of their bodies, pressed tightly to each other, seemed to give them new life, causing them to forget the fear and the mad dashing through the wood.

Above the pines, in the direction of the sea, the space began to be tinted with a whitish light. The stars seemed to go out, submerged in a wave of milk. The children, excited by the mysterious environment of the wood, watched this phenomenon with awe, as if someone were flying down to their aid in an aureole of light. The pine branches, with the thready texture of their foliage, stood out against a luminous background as if sketched in black. A shining object began to appear above the tree-tops: at first it was a slightly curved line, like a silver eyebrow; then it became a dazzling semi-circle, and at last, a huge face, of soft, honey color, which dragged along through

the neighboring stars its splendrous head of hair. The moon seemed to smile down upon the two children, who contemplated it with the adoration of little savages.

With the appearance of this chubby-cheeked countenance the wood became transformed; the rushes of the plain shone like silver fans. At the foot of each tree was a restless black spot, and the forest seemed to grow, to duplicate itself, a second shadowy grove extending over the bright ground. The *buxqueròts,* wild nightingales of the lake, and such intense lovers of their liberty that they die almost as soon as they are put into a cage, burst into song throughout the clearing, and even the mosquitoes buzzed more melodiously in the space that was drenched in light.

The two children began to find their adventure pleasant.

Neleta no longer felt any pain in her foot and she whispered softly into her companion's ear. Her precocious feminine instinct, her craftiness, like that of an abandoned and wandering kitten, made her superior to Tonet. They would remain in the wood, wouldn't they? The next day, when they returned to the town, they would make up some reason for their adventure. Sangonera would be blamed. They would spend the night there, seeing things they had never seen; they would sleep together: they would be like man and wife. And in their ignorance they trembled as they uttered these words, clutching their arms even more tightly. They hugged each other, as if their instincts told them that their growing affection required the blending of their bodies' warmth.

Tonet felt a strange, inexplicable intoxication. Never had the body of his playmate, which he had more than

once beaten in their rude games, possessed for him that sweet warmth which seemed to spread through his veins and rise to his head, causing the same light-headedness as the glasses of wine his grandfather used to offer him in the tavern. He gazed vaguely ahead of him, but his entire attention was concentrated on Neleta's head against his shoulder; on the caressing touch of her breath on his neck, as if a velvety hand were tickling him. The two were silent, and their silence added to the enchantment. She opened her green eyes, in whose depths the moon was reflected like a dewdrop, and turning so as to find a more comfortable position, closed them again.

"Tonet . . . . Tonet," she murmured, as if in a dream; and she pressed closer to her companion.

What time was it? . . . The boy felt his eyes closing, not so much with sleep as from the strange intoxication that seemed to overwhelm him. Of the forest murmurs he could now make out only the buzzing of the mosquitoes, fluttering like a nimbus of shadow above the hard skins of the lake children. Some of them screeched like strident violins, prolonging the same note infinitely; others, more grave, played a short scale, and the big ones droned with a muffled vibration, like bass-viols or the far-off tolling of a bell.

On the following morning they were awakened by the sun burning their faces, and the barking of a guardsman's dog which had thrust his jaws close to their eyes.

They were almost on the boundary of the Dehesa, and the distance to Palmar was very short.

Tonet's mother, usually so kind and sad, reimbursing herself for a night of anxiety, ran at him, stick in hand, and struck him several blows in spite of his swift agility.

In addition, by way of advance payment until Neleta's mother should arrive on the "eel cart," she cuffed and slapped the girl so that she would not get lost in the woods another time.

After this adventure the entire town, with tacit agreement, called Tonet and Neleta sweethearts. And the two, as if forever bound by that night of innocent proximity spent in the wood, sought each other out and loved each other without asserting it in so many words, as if it were thoroughly understood that they could belong only to each other. This episode spelled the end of their childhood. Gone were now their forays, their happy, carefree life exempt from all obligations. Neleta followed the same career as her mother: every night she would leave for Valencia, with the eel baskets, and she would not return until the following afternoon. Tonet, who could see her for only a moment at nightfall, worked on his father's fields, or went fishing with his grandfather.

Tío Tòni, formerly so lenient, was now as exacting as Tío Paloma, seeing that his son had grown up, and Tonet, like a resigned beast, let himself be dragged to work. His father, that obstinate hero of the soil, was not to be shaken in his determination. When the season for planting rice arrived, or the harvest time, the boy would spend all his days in Saler. The rest of the year he would fish in the lake, sometimes with his father, at others with his grandfather, who admitted him on board as his comrade, but who every moment swore against the beastly luck that had let such tramps be born into the family.

Moreover, the boy was impelled to work by boredom. There was nobody left in town for him to play with during the day. Neleta was in Valencia, and his

former playmates, now like himself grown up and obliged to earn their own living, went off in their fathers' boats. Sangonera was left; but that ragamuffin, after the adventure in the Dehesa, kept aloof from Tonet, keeping in mind the cudgelling he had received as a reward for his defection of that night.

The little tramp, as if this event had determined his future, had taken refuge in the priest's house, helping his servant, sleeping like a dog behind the door, without thinking of his father, who appeared only from time to time in his abandoned shack through the roof of which the rain fell as freely as in the open fields.

Old Sangonera now had a trade: when he wasn't drunk he devoted himself to hunting the otters of the lake, which having been unremittingly pursued for centuries, did not number a dozen in all.

One afternoon when he lay on a bank digesting his wine, he had seen the water begin to whirl and seethe with large bubbles. Somebody was diving deep, among the nets that stretched across the canal, looking for the *mornells* loaded with fish. Once in the water, with a pole that they let him take, he began to pursue with swift jabs a blackish animal that made for bottom until he slew it and took possession of it.

It was the famous *lludria,* which was spoken of in Palmar as a fantastic animal; the otter which in former days swarmed in the lake in such numbers that it made fishing impossible, breaking all the nets.

The old vagabond now considered himself the first man of the Albufera. The Society of Fisherman of Palmar, according to ancient statutes inscribed in the huge tomes in the custody of their head, the Warden, was

pledged to give a *duro* for each otter presented to them. The old man took his reward, but did not stop there. That animal was a treasure; and he began to exhibit it in the harbor of Catarroja, then at Silla, reaching as far as Sueca and Cullera in his triumphant trip around the lake.

He was in great demand. There wasn't a tavern where they didn't receive him with open arms. "Come right in Tío Sangonera! Let's see the big fellow you landed!" And the vagabond, after having himself treated to several glasses, would lovingly draw forth from under his coat the poor creature, whitish and foul-smelling, displaying its skin for the admiration of the spectators and letting them pass their hands across it—but very carefully, remember! —so that they might appreciate the fineness of its hair.

Never had little Sangonereta, when he first came into this world, been carried with more affectionate tenderness in the arms of his father, than was that creature. But with the passing of the days, folks tired of the *lludria,* nobody offered even a glass of bad whisky for the sight of it, and there wasn't a tavern that did not chase Sangonera out as if he had the plague, because of the insufferable stench from the putrefying animal he carried everywhere under his cloak. Before abandoning it, however, he made fresh profit from it, selling it in Valencia to a dissecter of animals, and since then he had told everybody about his vocation: he was going to be an otter hunter.

He now devoted himself to the quest of another otter, like one in pursuit of happiness. The reward given by the Society of Fishermen, and the week of continuous drunken hilarity at the expense of others, on a royal spree, could not leave his memory. But the second otter would not consent to be caught. Sometimes he imagined he

saw it in one of the remotest spots of the lake, but at once it would hide, as if the entire lake family had passed the word along about Old Sangonera's new profession. His despair caused him to get drunk on the otters that he expected to catch, and he had already gulped down two of them, when one night some fishermen found him drowned in a canal. He had slipped in the mire, and unable to pick himself up, because he was dead drunk, he remained in the water forever watching for his otter.

The death of Sangonera's father caused him to take refuge in the vicar's home; never did he return to the shanty. One curate succeeded another in Palmar, which was a punishment town, where only the hopeless ones came, or those who were in disgrace, and they escaped as soon as they could. All the vicars, on taking possession of the poor little church, took Sangonera over with it as if he were something necessary to the ritual. In all the town he was the only one who could assist at mass. He had at his fingertips all the things kept in the sacristy, with the number of rips, patches and moth-holes they had; he was so solicitous and eager to please in everything that no sooner did his master express a desire than it was at once fulfilled.

The fact that he was the only male of the town who did not labor with a pole in hand or spend his night in the middle of the Albufera, filled him with a certain pride, and made him look disdainfully and haughtily down upon everybody else.

Sundays, at daybreak, it was he who led the procession, holding the cross high, in front of the rosary. Men, women and children, in two long rows, went singing along in leisurely fashion, through the only street of the village,

afterwards turning aside to the banks and the isolated cabins so that the ceremony might take longer. In the scant light of the dawn the canals gleamed like sheets of dark steel, the clouds in the direction of the sea were tipped with red and the Moorish sparrows wheeled in flocks, rising from the roofs of the eel-ponds, answering the sad melancholy song of the faithful with their merry chirping of contented nomads.

"Christian, awake!" . . . . sang the procession through the town; and the comical part about the call was that the entire population was in the procession, and in the empty houses, only the dogs awoke with their barking, and the roosters, who broke in upon the sad chant with their crowing, as sonorous as a trumpet, saluting the dawn and the joy of another day.

Tonet, as he marched along in the row, glared with rage at his former chum, leading them all like a general, bearing the cross aloft like a banner. Ah, the scoundrel! He knew how to live a life to his taste!

And he, in the meantime, lived in submission to his father, who was daily growing graver and less communicative: good at bottom, but becoming cruelty itself toward his own family in his tenacious passion for work. The times were bad. The lands of Saler were not giving good harvest, and usury, to which Tío Tòni had had recourse to aid his undertakings, devoured the greater part of his efforts. At fishing, the Palomas always had bad luck, drawing the worst locations in the lake in the community allotments. Then there was the mother, slowly fading away; she was living in the death-agony, as if life were melting her down like a burning candle, with no other light than the sickly glow of her eyes.

It was a sad existence that Tonet now led. No longer did he stir Palmar with his escapades; no longer did the women neighbors kiss him and call him the handsomest boy in the town; no longer was he the one to be selected, on the day the *redolíns* (fishing sites) were drawn for, to put his hand into the leather bag of the Society and draw out the names. Now he was a man. Instead of his desires predominating in the home, as they had done when he was a pampered child, he was now ordered about; he counted as little as did La Borda, and at the slightest sign of rebellion, Tío Tòni's hand would rise menacingly, while the grandfather approved with shrill laughter, affirming that such was the way to bring up children.

When the mother died, the old affection between the grandfather and the boy seemed to be born anew. Tío Paloma deplored the absence of that docile creature who suffered all his whims in silence; he felt a vacuum about him, and seized upon his grandson, never very willingly obedient, but never daring to be contrary and stubborn in his presence.

They went fishing together, as they had done in the olden days; they would pass an hour at the tavern like comrades, while in the cabin poor La Borda would attend to the household duties with that precocity characteristic of undesirable creatures.

Neleta, too, was like one of the family. Her mother was no longer able to go to the Valencia market. The dampness of the Albufera seemed to have penetrated into her very marrow, paralyzing her body, and the poor woman lay motionless in her hut, groaning from rheumatic pains, howling like one of the damned, and unable to make a living. Her market companions would give

her alms from their baskets, and the little girl, when she grew hungry in the desolate cabin, would run to Tonet's place, aiding La Borda in her tasks with all the authority of an older child. Tío Tòni received her well. His generosity—that of the fighter in continuous battle with poverty—caused him to help all the needy.

Neleta grew up in her sweetheart's cabin. She would go there in quest of food, and her relations with Tonet assumed a character more sisterly than amorous.

The boy did not pay much attention to his sweetheart. He was sure of her. Whom else might he love? Did he have any right to take up with another, since the whole town had recognized them as sweethearts? And tranquil in the possession of Neleta, who grew up in poverty like a rare flower whose beauty contrasted with the physical wretchedness of the other daughters of Palmar, he devoted little attention to her, treating her with the same confidence as if they were already man and wife. At times weeks went by without his talking to her.

Other interests were now attracting this young man, who had won a reputation as the most powerful fellow in Palmar. He felt proud of the prestige he had acquired as a reckless valiant among his former playmates, now grown like him to manhood. He had fought with several, always emerging victor. Pole in hand, he had wounded a few on the head, and one afternoon he had run along the banks with his fishing spear in his hand, chasing a boatman from Catarroja who enjoyed notoriety as a fighter. His father made a wry face when he learned of these adventures, but the grandfather smiled, momentarily feeling reconciled to his grandson. What Tío Paloma found most worthy of praise was that the boy,

on a certain occasion, had faced the guards of the Dehesa, daringly retrieving a rabbit that he had just slain. He was not fond of work, but he had the Paloma blood.

This young gallant, who had not yet completed his eighteenth year, and who was much spoken of in his town, had his favorite spot, where he hurried as soon as his father's or his grandfather's boat had moored in the canal.

This was Cañamèl's tavern,—a new establishment that was the talk of all Albufera. It was not, like the other wine-shops, installed in a low-roofed, sooty cabin, with only the door for ventilation. It possessed a house all for itself, a structure which, among the straw cabins, seemed truly prodigious, with rubble-work walls painted blue, a tile roof, and two doors, one facing the only street of the town and the other, the canal. The space between the two doors was always crowded with rice planters and fishermen,—folk who drank, leaning on the counter, contemplating as if hypnotized the two rows of red casks, or sitting down upon the rope stools, before the pine tables, playing endless games of *brisca* and *truque*.

The sumptuous furnishings of this tavern filled the customers with pride. The walls were set with glazed Manises tiles, as high as one's head. Above, there extended across the walls fantastic blue or green landscapes, with horses the size of rats and trees smaller than the men, and from the beams of the roof hung strings of black-puddings, feather-grass sandals and coils of yellow, pungent rope, which were used as tackle on the large lake vessels.

Everybody admired Cañamèl. The money that that fat fellow had! . . . . He had been a civil guardsman in

Cuba, and a carabineer in Spain; afterward he had lived many years in Algeria: he had been a jack-of-all-trades and knew so much—so much!—as Tío Paloma said, that while he slept he discovered where every *peseta* was hiding, and on the following day he would run and get it.

Never had such wine as his been drunk in Palmar. The best of everything in that house! The owner received his customers pleasantly and charged a fair price.

Cañamèl was not a native of Palmar, nor even a Valencian. He came from far off, where the language was Castillian. In his youth he had been to the Albufera as a carabineer, and had married a poor, ugly girl of Palmar. After a wandering life, having accumulated a little money, he had come to settle down in his wife's town, yielding to her desires. The poor woman was sick and showed little signs of life: she seemed to have been exhausted by all those journeys that had caused her to yearn for her peaceful corner of the lake.

The other inn-keepers of the place inveighed against Cañamèl when they saw how he was taking their customers away. The big scoundrel! Not without reason did he give such good wine at such low prices! What least interested him was his tavern: his real business was elsewhere, and there was a reason, too, for his having come from such a distance to settle down there. But Cañamèl, when he learned of these words, smiled genially. After all, everybody had to live!

Cañamèl's most intimate friends knew that these rumors were not without foundation. The tavern was only a drop in the bucket. His principal business was practised at night, after closing the tavern. Not for nothing had he been a carabineer and patrolled the shores. Every

month bales fell upon the coast, rolling over the sand, pushed by a swarm of dark forms who picked them up and carried them across the Dehesa to the shores of the lake. There, the large vessels, the *laúdes*[1] of Albufera, which could take on a cargo of a hundred sacks of rice, loaded themselves with the bales of tobacco, slowly setting sail through the darkness for the mainland. . . . And on the following day, not a trace of anything.

For these expeditions he chose the bravest of the men who frequented his tavern. Tonet, despite his few years, was favored two or three times with Cañamèl's confidence because he was a valiant, discreet boy. In this nocturnal toil a good man could earn two or three *duros,* which afterward he returned to Cañamèl in the tavern, drinking his wine. Yet the wretched fellows, commenting the following day on the hazards of an expedition in which they had been the chief protagonists, would say to one another in wonderment: "What courage this Cañamèl has! . . . . How boldly he exposes himself to the clutches of the law! . . . ."

Things were going well. On the beach, all were blind, thanks to the tavern-keeper's cleverness. His former friends of Algiers sent him his cargoes punctually, and the business rolled along so smoothly, that Cañamèl, despite the fact that he paid very generously for the silence of those who could harm him, prospered rapidly. After a year's residence in Palmar he had already bought up rice lands and in the upper story of the tavern he had his sack of silver to help out those who came for loans.

His importance grew by leaps and bounds. At the be-

[1] Tombstones.

ginning they had nick-named him *Cañamèl* because of the soft, sweet voice in which he spoke a labored Valencian. Afterwards, seeing him grown wealthy, without forgetting his nick-name, they took to calling him Paco, since, as his wife said, they called him that in his own birthplace; and if they ever nick-named him Quico, as they did all the other Franciscos of the locality, he became furiously sullen.

When his wife, the wretched companion of his struggling days, died, her elder sister, an ugly fisherwoman, a widow of domineering character, tried to camp in the tavern as its overseer, escorted by all the other members of her family. They flattered Cañamèl with all the attentions inspired by a wealthy relative, telling him how hard it was for a man to attend to the tavern unaided. A woman was needed there! But Cañamèl, who had always detested his sister-in-law for her sharp tongue, and trembled at the possibility that she might aspire to take the still warm place of her sister, showed her the door, defying her scandalous protestations. For the care of the tavern two old women, the widows of fishermen, sufficed; they cooked the *all y pebres* for the gourmands who came from Valencia, and wiped off the bar against which the entire populace wore out their elbows.

Cañamèl, finding himself free, spoke against matrimony. A man with a fortune like his could marry only for convenience,—some woman who had more money than he. And at night he would laugh to hear Tío Paloma, who grew eloquent when he discoursed upon women.

The old boatman declared that a man should be like

the *buxqueròts* of the lake, who sing merrily as long as they are at liberty, but who, when shut up, prefer death to being caged.

All his comparisons were provided by the birds of the Albufera. Women! . . . A pestiferous tribe! They were the most ungrateful, forgetful creatures in all creation. All you had to do was look at the *collvèrts* of the lake. They always fly in company with the female, and never go anywhere or hunt a meal without her. The hunter shoots. If the female falls dead, the poor male, instead of taking to flight, hovers and hovers above the spot until the huntsman dispatches him, too. But if it's the poor male that falls, the female continues to fly gaily on, without turning her head, as if nothing had happened, and when she notices that her mate is missing, she looks for another . . . Christ! That's the way all females are, whether they wear feathers or skirts.

Tonet would pass his nights playing *truque* in the tavern, waiting anxiously for Sunday, so that he might spend the entire day there. He liked this idle life, with his jug within reach, shuffling the grimy cards over the cloth that covered the table, and betting with little pebbles or corn seeds that represented the amount of the wagers. Too bad he was not rich, like Cañamèl, so he could devote himself entirely to this lordly life! He fumed when he thought that on the following day he would have to be working like a horse in the boat, and his passion for idling became so great that Cañamèl no longer sought him out for the nocturnal expeditions, noticing with what a wry face he carried the bales and how he disputed with his co-laborers to avoid work.

He exhibited activity and shook off his somnolent indolence only at the prospect of an approaching diversion. During the great festivities in Palmar, in honor of the Infant Jesus, on the third day of Christmas week, Tonet distinguished himself among all the youths of the lake. When, on the eve of the feast the musicians arrived from Catarroja on a large boat, the youths ran into the water of the canal, fighting in the race out to seize the bass-drum. This was an honor, which gave the young men a chance to strut proudly before the maidens—to get possession of the huge instrument, place it on one's back and parade it through the town.

Tonet plunged almost up to his waist in the water, which was as cold as ice; he disputed first place with the boldest of the youths, and climbing up the gunwale of the vessel, made the huge drum his own.

Later, during the three holidays, came the stormy diversions which ordinarily wound up with blows. There was the ball in the square, by the light of resinous torches, where he obliged Neleta to remain seated, since she was not his sweetheart for nothing, while he danced with other less good-looking, but better-dressed girls; then there were the nights of the *albaes,* serenades given by the younger element, who went from door to door until daybreak, singing verses, guarding a skin of wine that replenished their strength, and accompanying each song with one salvo of cat-calls and another of shots.

But after this season passed by, Tonet again began to feel bored with his life of toil, bounded by the horizon of the lake. At times he would defy his father's anger and escape, disembarking in the harbor of Catarroja and making a tour of the inland towns, where he had friends

during the harvest season. At other times he would take the road to Saler, and would arrive at Valencia, fully intending to remain permanently in the city, until hunger sent him back again to the cabin of his father. He had seen near at hand the life of those who live without toil, and was disgusted with his wretched lot which forced him to remain like an amphibian in a land of reeds and mud, where man, from his earliest days, has to shut himself in a tiny craft,—an eternal coffin without which he could not move around.

The hunger for pleasures arose in him,—a ravenous, dominating passion. He gambled at the tavern until Cañamèl would throw him out at midnight; he had tested all the drinks that are used in Albufera, including the pure absinthe that the hunters bring from the city to mix with the vile-tasting water of the lake; and more than one night, when he stretched himself out on his bed, his father's eyes had followed him with a severe expression, noting his uncertain step and his drunken, panting respiration. The grandfather protested indignantly. That he should drink wine, all well and good; after all, they were forever on the lake and a good boatman needs to keep his stomach warm. . . . But *mixed* drinks?. . . . That was how Old Sangonera had begun!

Tonet forgot all his affections. He beat La Borda, treating her as if she were a submissive beast, and he scarcely paid any attention to Neleta, receiving her words with snorts of impatience. If he obeyed his father it was in so churlish a manner that the industrious toiler turned pale, his powerful hands twitching as if he were aching to strangle his son. The youth looked down upon the entire town, considering it a wretched herd, born

for hunger and fatigue, and out of whose ranks he must rise at all costs. Those who returned proudly from their day's fishing, exhibiting their baskets of eels and tenches, made him laugh. As he passed the vicar's house he could see Sangonera, who, now given up to reading, spent hours seated at the door perusing religious books and masking his rascally countenance with a sanctimonious air. Imbecile! What did he care for the old books that the vicar lent him? . . . .

He desired to live, to enjoy all the delights of existence at a time. He imagined that every person dwelling on the other side of the lake, in the wealthy towns or in the great, bustling city, was robbing him of the share of pleasures that was his by an indisputable right.

During the harvest season, when thousands of men came from all the corners of the province to the Albufera, attracted by the big pay offered for help by the proprietors, Tonet managed for a moment to reconcile himself to life in that corner of the world. He would see new faces, would make friends, and found a rare joy among these vagabonds, who, sickle in hand and a bundle of clothes slung over their shoulder, went from one place to another working while the sun shone, and getting drunk as soon as night fell.

He was fond of these fellows and their wandering lives, and their stories appealed to him as far more interesting than the fireside tales he had always heard. Some had been to America, and forgetting the wretchedness of their lives in those remote countries, spoke of them as of a paradise where everybody swam in gold. Others told of their long stays in wild Algeria, on the very outskirts of the desert, where for a long time they

had been in hiding, because of a knife-thrust they had given in their home towns, or a robbery that had been "framed up" against them by their enemies. And Tonet, as he listened, imagined he could detect, in the vile-smelling breeze that blew over Albufera, the exotic perfume of those marvellous countries, and in the tiles of the tavern he could behold their fabulous wealth.

This friendship with the vagrant laborers became so close that, when the harvest was over and they had collected their pay, Tonet took part with them in a brutal orgy through the towns lying near the lake; a mad carousal from one wine-shop to another, of *albaes* sung at night before certain windows, and ending in a general brawl when, the money having given out, the wine began to taste rather sour and disputes arose as to whose turn it was to pay.

One of these expeditions became famous throughout Albufera. It lasted more than a week, and during all this time Tío Tòni did not see his son in Palmar. It was learned that the band of roisterers was running amuck like a wild beast over near Ribera, and that in Sollana they had cudgelled a guard, while in Sueca two of the gang had received cracked heads in a tavern squabble. The Civil Guard was despatched to take the crazy expedition in hand.

One night Tòni was informed that his son had just appeared at Cañamèl's place, his clothes all drenched in mud, as if he had fallen into a canal, and his eyes still burning from his seven-day spree. The sombre toiler went there, as silent as ever, with a barely perceptible snort that moved his lips as if they were stuck to each other.

His son was sitting in the middle of the tavern, drinking with the thirst of the drunkard, surrounded by an attentive public, which he filled with laughter at the account of the deviltries they had committed on this wild spree.

With a single blow Tío Tòni struck the jug that the youth was bringing to his lips, and sent it shattering to the floor, while the boy's head fell upon his shoulder. Tonet, thunderstruck by the blow, and beholding his father before him, for a moment or two recoiled; very soon, however, with a clouded, impure, terror-inspiring look in his eyes he rose to attack him, shouting that nobody would strike him and get away unpunished, not even his own father.

But it was no easy matter to resist that grave, silent giant, as firm as duty, who bore in his muscles the energy of more than thirty years of continuous battle wih poverty. Without opening his lips he dominated the wild beast that tried to bite him; with a blow that sent his son staggering, and, almost at the same time, with a kick he threw him against the wall, where he fell on his elbows across a table where some men were gambling.

The bystanders rushed upon the father to restrain him, but in his anger the silent giant would belabor every customer in the place. When calm had been restored and they let Tío Tòni go, his son was no longer there. He had fled, with his arms raised in an attitude of despair. . . . He had been thrashed! . . . . He, who was so much feared! . . . And in the presence of all Palmar! . . . .

Several days went by without any news from Tonet. Little by little it was discovered that he had gone to the

Valencian market. He was in the barracks of Monte-Olivete, and very soon would embark for Cuba. He had enlisted. Fleeing desperately toward the city, he had stopped in some taverns near the barracks where the recruiting banner for service across the sea had been displayed. The men that were swarming there, volunteers waiting for embarkation and wily recruiting-officers, had induced him to take the step.

At the very first, Tío Tòni felt like protesting. The boy was not yet twenty; the affair was illegal. Besides, it was his son, his only son. But, with his habitual harshness, the grandfather induced him to let the matter go. It was the best possible thing that could happen to the grandson. He was growing up crooked: let him wander about the world and suffer! They'd see to straightening him out! And if he died, one tramp less: after all, everybody had to die sooner or later.

The youth left without protest upon his father's part. La Borda was the only one who, escaping from the cabin, appeared at Monte-Olivete and weepingly said good-bye to him, after giving him all his clothes and whatever money she could scrape together without Tío Tòni's knowledge. And not a word to Neleta: the youth seemed to have forgotten her.

Two years went by without any signs of life from Tonet. One day there came a letter for the father, opening with dramatic phrases, keyed in a false sentimentality, in which Tonet asked his pardon, speaking then of his new existence. He was a civil guard in Guantánamo, and things were not so bad at all. In his style could be noted a certain vainglorious air,—that of a man who

struts about the fields with his gun across his shoulder, scattering terror and inspiring respect. His health was excellent. Not the slightest illness ever since he had left. The men from the Albufera withstood the island climate with perfect ease. Anyone who had been brought up in that lake, drinking its muddy water, could fearlessly travel anywhere; he was acclimated.

Then came the Spanish-American war. In Tío Tòni's cabin La Borda went around trembling with fear, weeping in the corners whenever there arrived at Palmar confused news of the battles that were taking place far away. Two women of the town were wearing mourning. The youths, when they marched to the draft, did so to the accompaniment of desperate weeping, as if their families would never behold them again.

But Tonet's letters were tranquilizing, and exhibited great confidence. Now he was the head of a band of mounted guerrilla-fighters, and seemed well content with his existence. He described himself in great detail, as attired in striped cotton duck, with a wide Panama hat, patent-leather boots, his machete striking against his thighs, his mauser carbine across his shoulder and his belt filled with cartridges. He hadn't a care in the world; this was the life for him: good pay, plenty of action and the great freedom that danger permits. "Let the war come!" he said, merrily, in his letters. And one could easily conjure up the picture of the braggart soldier, content with his position, happy to suffer fatigue, hunger and thirst, in return for liberating himself from monotonous, commonplace toil, for living outside of the laws of normal times, for killing without fear of punishment

and considering everything he looked upon as his own, imposing his will beneath the shelter of war's grim exigencies.

From time to time Neleta learned of her sweetheart's adventures. Her mother had died. She was now living in the cabin of one of her aunts, and earned her living by serving in Cañamèl's place on the days when special customers came and there were many *paellas* to see to.

She would come to the Paloma cabin and ask La Borda whether a letter had arrived; she would listen while it was read, with her eyes lowered and her lips pressed tightly together so as to concentrate all the more effectively. It seemed that her feelings for Tonet had grown cold ever since that flight, in which he showed no signs of having his sweetheart at all in mind. Her eyes would sparkle and she would smile, murmuring *grasies* (thanks) when, at the end of the letters the guerrilla-fighter would send his regards to her; but she showed no desire to have the youth return, nor was she enthusiastic when he built castles in the air, assuring them all that he would yet come back to Palmar in an officer's uniform.

Other matters were on Neleta's mind. She had become the most attractive girl in the Albufera. She was small, but her hair, bright blond, grew in such abundance that it formed upon her head a helmet of that ancient gold discolored by time. Her skin was white, of an almost transparent clarity, showing a delicate network of veins; such a skin had never been seen in the women of Palmar, whose scaly hide, of metallic glint, offered a distant resemblance to that of the tenches in the lake. Her eyes were small, of a cloudy green, shining

like two drops of the absinthe the hunters from Valencia drank.

She frequented Cañamèl's place more and more. No longer did she lend her services only upon extraordinary occasions. She spent the entire day in the tavern, cleaning it, handing glasses over the counter, watching the fire where the pans bubbled, and when night came she would march off ostentatiously to her aunt's cabin, chaperoned by the latter, attracting universal attention, so that Cañamèl's hostile relatives might take due notice. Surely enough the relatives began to spread rumors that maybe Neleta saw the sun rise at her employer's side.

Cañamèl could not do without her. The widower, who up to that time had lived in peace with his old servants, publicly scorning all women, was unable to resist the contact with this designing little creature who rubbed against him with feline touch. Poor Cañamèl felt himself burn under the green eyes of that kitten, who scarcely beheld him at ease than she set about to rob him of his peace by skilful encounters that revealed her hidden charms. Her words and glances disturbed in the aging tavern-keeper a chastity of several years duration. The customers sometimes noticed that he had scratches on his face; at other times his eyes would be black and blue; and they would laugh at the confused excuses that the tavern-keeper would try to make. The little girl knew how to defend herself from Cañamèl's irresistible fits of passion! She set him afire with her eyes and extinguished him with her nails! At times, in the inner rooms of the place there would be heard the scraping of furniture, and the partitions would tremble with the impact of furious shoves, while the drinkers would laugh maliciously. . . . Cañamèl try-

ing to pet his cat! He'd certainly show up behind the bar with a new scratch! . . . .

This struggle had to come to an end. Neleta was too firm for the heavy-paunched fellow, who trembled when she threatened never to return to the tavern, and at last surrendered. All Palmar was stirred by the news of Cañamèl's marriage to her, although it was something they had long expected. The groom's sister-in-law went from door to door, belching insults. The women formed groups before the cabins. . . . The impudent little hussy! How well she had gone about it to catch the wealthiest man in Albufera! Nobody recalled her former affair with Tonet. Six years had gone by since he had left, and rarely did men return from the place he had gone to.

Neleta, when she took possession of the tavern as its legitimate proprietress,—a place frequented by the whole town and to which the needy came imploring loans from Cañamèl,—did not swell up with pride, nor did she desire to wreak vengeance upon the gossips who had slandered her during the time she acted as servant. She treated everybody kindly, but in order to avoid undue familiarity she interposed the bar between herself and the women visitors.

She no longer visited the cabin of the Palomas. She treated La Borda as a sister when the latter came to purchase anything, and she served Tío Paloma his wine in the largest glass they had, trying to forget his small debts. Tío Tòni came very seldom to the tavern; but whenever Neleta saw him, she greeted him most respectfully, as if that silent, preoccupied man were a parent that did not care to own her, but whom she revered in secret.

These were the only affections of the past that survived

in her. She ran her establishment as if she had never done anything else; she knew how to silence the drinkers with a single word; her white arms, always with the sleeves rolled up, seemed to attract persons from all the banks of the Albufera; the business was progressing famously, and every day she seemed fresher, prettier, prouder than ever, as if all at once her body had been infused with all her husband's wealth, which was spoken of with astonishment and envy throughout the lake district.

On the other hand, Cañamèl seemed, in a way, to show symptoms of decline soon after marriage. The health and bloom of his wife seemed to be stolen from him. Finding himself wealthy and married to the most beautiful girl in all Albufera, he seemed to think that now the moment had come to get sick for the first time in his life. Times were not favorable to the smuggling business; the young, inexperienced officers in charge of the coast guard would not do business with him, and since Neleta knew more about the tavern than Cañamèl, the latter, not knowing what to do, decided to be an invalid which is, according to Tío Paloma, a rich man's luxury.

The old fellow knew better than anybody else what the tavern-keeper's trouble was, and he spoke of it. The amorous beast had been aroused in him, after having lain dormant during the years when his only passion was that of gain. Neleta exercised the same influence over him that she had done when she was his servant. The glitter of those two drops of her eyes, a smile, a word, the touch of her arm as it met his while she filled the glasses on the bar, were enough to go to his head. But

now Cañamèl received no scratches, nor were the customers scandalized when he left the counter. . . .

And in this way time went by. Cañamèl kept complaining of mysterious ailments; now his head would ache, now his stomach; he grew obese and flaccid, with billows of fat through which the degeneration of his organism could be guessed; and Neleta grew stronger day by day, as if the tavern-keeper's life, as it melted away drop by drop, fell into her veins like a regenerating stream.

Tío Paloma commented with comical gravity upon the situation. The race of the Cañamèls would reproduce so fruitfully that it would overrun all Palmar. But four years went by, and Neleta, despite her fervent desires, had not become a mother. She wanted a son, that her position might be assured, and also, as she said, to make the first wife's relatives burst with envy and rage. Every six months the news was bruited about in the town that she was pregnant, and when the women entered the tavern they would examine her with inquisitorial attention, fully aware of the importance such an event would have in the contest of the tavern-proprietress against her enemies. But always this hope foundered.

The moment it was supposed that Neleta was on the way to becoming a mother, the most atrocious rumors were set afloat concerning her. Her enemies thought maliciously of some of the rice-land owners that came from the towns of the Ribera and stopped over at the inn; of some hunter from Valencia; even of the lieutenant of the carabineers, who, bored in the solitude of Torre Nueva, would come once in a while and tie his horse to the olive tree before Cañamèl's place, after having

crossed the mud of the canals: they thought, in fact, of anybody and everybody, except the sickly tavern-keeper, who was more than ever a prey to that insatiable passion which seemed to consume him.

Neleta would smile at the rumors. She did not love her husband; of that much she was certain: she felt a greater attraction for many who visited her tavern, but she possessed the prudence of the egotistic, foreseeing woman who marries for convenience and does not wish to compromise her easy position by infidelity.

One day the news was circulated that Tío Tòni's son was in Valencia. The war was over. The batallions, without arms, and with that sickly aspect of ailing flocks, were disembarking in the ports. They were famished specters, feverish phantoms, as yellow as candles seen in funeral ceremonies, their will-to-live sparkling in their eyes, which were as deep as a star at the bottom of a well. They all marched off to their homes, incapable of ever working again, and destined to die off within a year, in the bosom of their families, who had given a man and received in return a shadow.

Tonet was welcomed in Palmar with curiosity and enthusiasm. He was the only one from the place that had come back. And how he came back! . . . . emaciated and weakened by the privations of the final days of the war, for he was among those who had been through the blockade of Santiago. But apart from this he looked well, and the old women admired his thin, wiry figure, the military poses that he assumed at the foot of the rachitic olive that adorned the square, twirling his mustache (a manly decoration that was worn in all Palmar only by the chief of the carabineers), and exhibiting his

great collection of straw hats,—the sole wardrobe he had brought back from the war. At night Cañamèl's place would be thronged with folks who were eager to hear all about the island beyond the seas.

He had forgotten his military braggadoccio, the times when he had thrashed suspected non-combatants and entered the hovels revolver in hand. Now all his tales were about the Americans,—the Yankees he had seen at Santiago; a set of tall, sinewy fellows who ate plenty of meat and wore tiny hats. And here his descriptions ended. The huge stature of the enemy was the sole impression that had remained in his memory. And the silence of the tavern was rent with loud guffaws when Tonet recounted the story of one of those chaps, who, finding him covered with rags, had presented him with a pair of trousers before he embarked for Spain,—so wide and long that they covered him almost like a sail.

Neleta, behind the bar, listened, and gazed at him fixedly. Her eyes were inexpressive; the two green drops were lustreless, but not for an instant did they leave Tonet, as if they were eager to retain the image of that martial figure, so distinct from the appearance of all who surrounded him, and so utterly different from the youth who ten years before had been her sweetheart.

Cañamèl, touched by patriotism and enthused by the extraordinary crowds that Tonet attracted to the tavern, shook hands with the soldier, offered him glass after glass, and questioned him about Cuba, learning of the changes that had taken place since that remote time when he had been there.

Tonet went everywhere, escorted by Sangonera, who was filled with admiration for his boyhood chum. He

had abandoned the books loaned to him by the vicars. His father's weakness for the wandering life and wine had awakened in him, and the curate had thrown him out of church, tired of the droll stupidities he would commit while assisting him, dead drunk, at mass. Besides, Sangonera did not agree, as he remarked gravely amid the laughter of all, with the curate's way of looking at things. And aged in his youth by an interminable drunkenness, tattered and grimy, he lived from hand to mouth, as in his childhood days, sleeping in his shanty, which was worse than a pig-sty, and showing his gaunt, ascetic figure, which scarcely cast a shadow upon the floor, wherever there was a drink to be had.

In Tonet's company he found many a treat, and he was the first in the tavern to ask the soldier to tell his tales, for he knew that after the story would come the drinks.

The repatriated warrior was content with this life of ease and admiration. Palmar now seemed an abode of delight, in comparison with the memory of nights passed in the trench, his stomach collapsing with hunger, and of the terrible trip in a vessel laden with ailing flesh, strewing the sea with corpses.

After a month of this easy life, his father one night spoke to him in the silence of the cabin. What did he intend to do? Now he was a man and should consider his wild oats sown and think seriously of the future. He had certain plans of his own, which he desired to communicate to his son and only heir. By laboring unremittingly, with the persistence of honest men, they might yet make a little fortune. A city woman, the same that had rented out the Saler lands to him, won over by his sim-

plicity and his diligence, had just presented to him a large tract of land close to the lake; a *tancat* that could produce countless bushels of grain.

There was only one thing in the way of commencing the proper cultivation, and this was, that the gift was under water, and the fields would have to be filled in by carrying many boatloads of earth,—many indeed!

That meant either spending a lot of money, or doing it one's self. But, what the devil! They must not lose courage. That's the way all the land around the Albufera had been formed. The rich possessions of today had been part of the lake fifty years previous, and two healthy, spirited men who were not afraid of work could perform miracles. That was far better than fishing in wretched spots or working land owned by another.

Tonet was attracted by the novelty of the enterprise. If they had asked him to till the best and oldest fields near Palmar, he might have made a wry face; but the idea of battling with the lake, of converting the water into land that could be cultivated, of causing harvests to arise where formerly eels wriggled among the aquatic plants, appealed to him. Besides, in the rapidity of his thought, he could already behold only the results, without taking the actual labor into account. They would be wealthy and he could rent out the lands, living the life of an idler, which was his chief ambition.

Father and son attacked the task, aided by La Borda, who was ever inspired by anything that would add to the prosperity of the house. As to the grandfather, nothing might be expected of him. The project had made him just as indignant as when his son had first decided to devote himself to land cultivation. More fellows who

wished to cramp the lake of Albufera by converting the water into fields.

And those who were committing such an indignity were of his own family! The bandits! . . .

Tonet attacked the work with all that momentary ardor characteristic of weak-willed creatures. His desire was to fill at a single stroke that corner of the lake where his father sought riches. Even before dawn, Tonet and La Borda would go off, in two little boats, in search of earth, to bring it, after more than an hour's journey, to the wide stretch of dead water whose limits were marked by the mud banks.

The work was fatiguing, overwhelming, an ant-like task. Only Tío Tòni, with the bravery of the indefatigable toiler, was capable of having attacked it without any aid other than his family and his two arms.

They went to the large canals that flow into the Albufera; to the harbors of Catarroja and Saler. With wide forks they tore out of the bed huge lumps of mud, hunks of gelatinous peat, which stirred up a horrible stench. These lumps from the bottom of the canals they would leave to dry on the banks, and when the sun converted them into whitish clods, they would load them into the two boats, which would join and form a single vessel. After an hour's incessant poling they would have carried to the *tancat* the heap of earth they had so painfully got together, and the waters would swallow it without any apparent result, as if the cargo had dissolved without leaving a trace. The fishermen would notice the laborious family pass by two or three times during the day, gliding along like gnats over the polished surface of the lake.

Tonet soon wearied of this dredging and filling in. His will-power could not hold out; after the fascination of the first moment had evaporated, he saw how monotonous the work was, and with terror calculated the months and even the years that were needed to bring the work to completion. He thought of what it would have cost to dredge up each heap of earth, and trembled with emotion to behold how the water grew muddy as it received the cargo, and then grew clear again, showing an unaltered bed, as deep and level as ever, without the slightest hump, as if all the earth poured in had escaped through a hidden hole.

He began to shirk the labor. As a pretext he spoke of the return of certain ailments that he had caught during the war, and would remain at the cabin. No sooner would La Borda and his father leave, however, than he would run off to his new corner in Cañamèl's place, where partners were never lacking for a game of *truque,* and where the jug was always within reach. At most he worked two days a week.

Tío Paloma, in his hatred for the men who were robbing the lake by filling it in, celebrated his grandson's indolence with loud laughter. Hee! Hee! . . . . His son had been a fool to have any faith in Tonet. He knew the boy well. He had been born with a stiff spine that prevented his bending over and working. His soldiering had made it stiffer than ever, and there was no helping it now at all. He knew the only medicine: only the gallows could break him!

But since at bottom he was happy to see his son suffer difficulty in his enterprise, he accepted Tonet's laziness

and even smiled to him when he met him at Cañamèl's place.

The town began to gossip about Tonet's frequent visits to the tavern. He would always sit down before the bar, and Neleta and he would look and look at each other. The proprietress spoke less to Tonet than to other customers, but during the less busy moments, when she would be sitting before the casks doing something or other, every time she raised her eyes they would gaze instinctively in the youth's direction. The customers also observed that the Cubano, after his card games, sought out Neleta with his glance.

Cañamèl's former sister-in-law carried this news from door to door. They had an understanding between themselves! All you had to do was look at them and you could see that! They were going to make a ridiculous fool out of that old tavern-keeper! Between the two of them they would eat up the whole fortune that her poor sister had amassed! And when the least credulous mentioned the impossibility of the two getting together in a tavern full of customers, the harpy protested. They would meet outside the place. Neleta was capable of anything, and he, an enemy of work, had taken up his place in the tavern, certain that he would be supported there.

Cañamèl, unaware of these rumors, treated Tonet as his best friend. He played cards with him and scolded his wife if she did not invite him. He read nothing in Neleta's glance, in the strange, slightly ironical glitter of her eyes as she received these reproofs and offered her former sweetheart a glass.

The rumors that were circulating through Palmar at last reached Tío Tòni's ears, and one night, taking his son out of the cabin, he spoke to him with the sadness of a wearied man struggling in vain against misfortune.

Tonet did not care to help him,—he saw that clearly. He was the same lazy good-for-nothing as before, born to spend his life in the tavern. Now he was a man: he had been to war, and his father could not support him as he had formerly done. Didn't he want to work? . . . . Very well; he would keep on working all by himself, even though he should die like a dog, always in the hope of leaving a bit of bread at his death to the ingrate that had deserted him.

But what he could not look upon calmly was to see his son spend all his days in Cañamèl's place, in the company of his former sweetheart. He could go to other taverns; any one at all, except that one.

Tonet protested vehemently at these words. Lies, all lies! Slander that La Samaruca had invented; that malignant beast, Cañamèl's sister-in-law, who hated Neleta and didn't care what she said! And Tonet spoke all this with the energetic accents of truth, vowing by the memory of his mother that he hadn't touched so much as a finger of Neleta's, nor said the least word that might recall their former betrothal.

Tío Tòni smiled sadly. He believed it: he didn't doubt these words at all. More: he was certain that up to now all the talk had been mere gossip. But he knew life. Now it was only glances; tomorrow, attracted by continual contact, they would, as result of this dangerous game, fall into dishonor. Neleta had always seemed to him a vain,

light-headed creature, and she wasn't of the sort to give any example of prudence.

After this, the spirited laborer spoke in such sincere, kindly accents that he impressed Tonet.

He must remember that he was the son of an honest man, with bad luck in his affairs, but whom nobody in all the Albufera could reproach for an evil deed.

Neleta had a husband, and he who seeks another man's wife adds treachery to sin. Besides, Cañamèl was a friend of his; they spent the day together, playing and drinking like comrades, and to deceive a man under such circumstances would be rank cowardice deserving of a bullet in the head.

The father's tone became solemn.

Neleta was rich, his son poor, and folks might think that he was chasing after her as a means of being supported without having to work. This is what irritated him; what converted his sadness into anger.

Rather would he see his son dead than to feel shame at such a dishonor. Tonet! Boy! . . . . He must think of his family, of the Palomas, as old as Palmar itself: a family of hard workers as unfortunate as they were upright; overwhelmed with debts because of their bad luck, but incapable of treachery.

They were children of the lake, tranquil in their misery, and on undertaking their last voyage, when God should call them, they could sail to the very foot of His throne, showing the Lord, for lack of other merits, their hands covered with callouses, like the paws of a beast, but their souls clean of all crime.

## IV

THE second Sunday in July was for Palmar the most important day in the year.

It was on this day that lots were drawn by the inhabitants of the town for the *redolins,* the fishing sites on lake Albufera and its canals. It was a solemn, traditional ceremony, presided over by a delegate from La Hacienda.[1] —a mysterious woman whom nobody had ever seen, but who was spoken of with superstitious awe, seeing that she was proprietress of the lake and the interminable pine-groves of the Dehesa.

At seven in the morning the church bell had sent the whole town scurrying off to mass. The festivities in honor of the Infant Jesus, after Christmas, were solemn indeed; but after all they were nothing more than pure diversions, while in the ceremony of the lot-drawing there was at stake the year's living and even a chance to get rich if the fishing were good.

For this reason the mass on this Sunday was the one listened to with greatest devotion. The women did not have to go looking for their husbands, pushing them along to the church and forcing them to fulfil their religious duties. All the fishermen were in church, abstracted, thinking more of the lake than of the mass, and in their mind's eye they could see the lake of Albufera and its canals, and were getting ready to select the most favorable

[1] The Ministry of Finance.

sites if luck smiled on them with the first numbers.

The church, small, with whitewashed walls, high windows and green curtains, could not contain all the faithful on this day. The door was wide open and the public overflowed into the square, all heads uncovered in the July sun. On the altar the Infant Jesus, the town's patron, displayed his smiling countenance and his hollow skirt; the image was no more than a palm in height, but in spite of its smallness, it was able, during stormy nights, to fill the vessels of those who had won the best places with eels, and perform other no less astounding miracles talked about by the women of Palmar.

On the walls there stood out against the white background some paintings that came from old convents: huge pictures with phalanxes of condemned souls,—all red, as if they had just been cooked,—and angels in parrot-like plumages goading them along with flaming swords.

Above the font of holy water, a little placard in Gothic characters read as follows:

> Si por la ley del amor no es
> lícito delinquir, no se permite
> escupir en las casa del Señor.[1]

Everybody in Palmar admired these verses,—the work according to Tío Paloma, of a certain vicar who dwelt there in the olden days when the boatman was yet a boy. All had practised reading it, deciphering the words during the endless masses of their existence as good Christians. But if they admired the poetry, they did not take the advice, and the fishermen, without any respect whatsoever

[1] If by the law of love it is unjust to do wrong, spitting in the house of the Lord is condemned.

for the "law of love," coughed and spat with their chronic amphibian hoarseness, and the ceremony would proceed amidst a continuous hawking and expectoration that dirtied the floor and drew the angry glances of the celebrant.

Never had Palmar had a vicar like *pare Miquèl*. It was said that he had been sent thither as a punishment, but his disgrace appeared to be quite to his liking. An indefatigable huntsman, no sooner would mass be over than he would put on his esparto sandals, clap his skin cap on, and followed by his dog, he would make for the Dehesa or run his little skiff through the thick reeds to shoot coots. A fellow must help himself out in a wretched position like his, he said. The pay was five *reales* a day, and he would be condemned to die of hunger, like his predecessors, if it weren't for his gun, which the forest guards tolerated, and which brought down meat for his table every day. The women admired his vigorous integrity of character, seeing that he all but regulated them with his fists. The men applauded no less the simple directness with which he went about his religious duties. He was a gun-priest. When the town magistrate had to spend the night in Valencia, he would delegate his authority to Don Miguel, and the latter, content with the change, would say to the chief of the coast-guardsmen:

"You and I are the only authorities of the town. Let's watch well over it."

And, with their guns slung across their shoulders, they would make their nocturnal rounds, entering the taverns to send the men off to bed, stopping at the presbytery several times to drink a glass of cane-liquor, until daybreak. Then Don Miguel, laying aside his weapon and his con-

trabandist uniform, would enter the church to say mass for the fishermen.

Sundays, while he performed the sacred rites, he would look out of the corner of his eye at the faithful, noting those who kept on spitting, the gossips who chattered about their neighbors, the youngsters pushing each other near the door; and on turning around, drawing his proud body erect for the communal blessing, he would stare so reprovingly at the guilty ones that they trembled in anticipation of *pare Miquèl's* threats. It was he who had kicked out drunken Sangonera, having caught him the third or fourth time with the wine-bottle of the sacristy. In his house only the priest could drink. His natural violence accompanied him in all his sacred functions, and many a time, in the midst of mass, noticing that the successor to Sangonera was making mistakes in the responses or was slow in fetching the Gospel from one side to the other, he would give him a kick from behind the lace trimmings of his alb, clucking his tongue as if he were calling a dog.

His morality was a simple code: it dwelt in the stomach. When the penitent parishioners excused their faults at confession, the penance imposed was always the same. What they needed was to eat more! That's why the evil spirit could grasp them so easily, seeing how thin and yellowish they were. As he put it: "More good food and less sin." And if anyone replied to this advice by pleading poverty, the priest would wax indignant, uttering a round oath. *Recordóns!* Poor, and they living in the Albufera, the best corner of the world? There was he himself with his five *reales* per day, and he had a better time of it than any patriarch. They had banished him to

Palmar thinking to give him a wretched lot, and he would exchange his post only for a canonry in Valencia. Why had God created the wood-cocks in the Dehesa, who swarmed as plentiful as flies, the rabbits, as numerous as the blades of grass, and all those birds of the lake, which rose from the brakes in dozens as soon as the reeds were stirred? Did they expect the meat to fall already plucked and spiced, right into their pots? . . . . What they needed was more attention to work and fear of God. They shouldn't give themselves up exclusively to fishing eels, spending hour after hour in a boat, like a woman, and eating whitish meat that reeked of mud. That's why they were such a disgusting lot of mouldy old sinners. A man with red blood in his veins,—*cordones!*—ought to get his food as he himself did . . . . with the gun! . . . .

After Easter, when all Palmar emptied its sack of sins in the confessional, the sounds of shots would multiply in the Dehesa and on the lake, and the guards would dash wildly here and there, at a loss to explain this sudden hunting craze.

The mass was ended, and the people scattered over the square. The women did not return to their cabins to prepare the mid-day meal. They remained with the men, before the schoolhouse, where the drawing took place. This was the best building in Palmar,—the only one with two stories,—a little structure that had its boys' section downstairs, and the girls' section above it. It was in the upper room that the drawing took place, and through the open windows could be seen the *alguacil,*[1] aided by Sangonera, arranging the table with the presidential chair for

[1] Constable.

the gentleman who was to come from Valencia, and the benches from the two schoolrooms, for the fishermen who belonged to the Society.

The oldest people of the town gathered about the twisted, almost barren olive tree,—the sole decoration of the little square. This snarled, ancient tree, torn up from the mountains to languish in a muddy soil, was the rendezvous of the people,—the spot where all the acts of their civic life took place. Beneath its branches all fishing arrangements were made, boats were traded, and eels were sold to the retail dealers of the city. When anybody found in the waters of the Albufera a lost *mornell,* a floating pole, or any other fishing instrument, he left it at the foot of the olive tree, and the people would file past it until the owner would recognize it by the special mark that each fisherman placed upon his belongings.

They all spoke of the approaching drawing with the tremulous emotion of those who confide their future to chance. Within an hour there would be decided, for each of them, poverty or abundance for an entire year. Among the groups the talk was chiefly confined to the six first sites,—the six best *redolins,*—the only ones that could make a fisherman rich, and which corresponded to the first six numbers that came out of the bag. These were the sites of *La Sequiòta,* or those near it,—the road followed by the eels during those stormy nights on which they ran to the sea, only to encounter the nets of the *redolins,* where they were held prisoner.

One recalled, in a mysterious tone, certain lucky fishermen who owned a site in *La Sequiòta,* and who, on a stormy night, when the lake of Albufera rolled with waves

that revealed the muddy bed, had caught six hundred *arrobas*[1] *of fish.* Six hundred arrobas, at two *duros!*[2] . . . Their eyes burned with the fire of envy, but all spoke in a whisper, repeating the figures of the catch in a mysterious fashion, fearing lest some stranger should overhear them. For since childhood each of them had learned, with a strange feeling of solidarity, the advantage of always averring that fishing was bad, so that the Ministry of Finance (that unknown, hoggish old dame) should not afflict them with new taxes.

Tío Paloma spoke of the good old days when folks didn't multiply as rapidly as rabbits in the Dehesa, and when the drawing was entered by only some sixty fishermen who alone made up the Society. How many were they now? In the drawing of the previous year more than a hundred and fifty had participated. If the population continued to grow, the fishermen would outnumber the eels and Palmar would lose the advantages of its *redolín* privilege, which gave it a certain superiority over all the other fishing communities of the lake.

The recollection of these "others,"—of the fishermen of Catarroja who shared with those of Palmar the use of the lake, irritated Tío Paloma. He hated them as much as he hated the farmers who robbed the water in their creation of new fields. According to what the old boatman said, those fishermen who lived far from the lake, in the suburbs of Catarroja, mingling with the farmers and working the soil when pay was big, were merely occasional fishermen, persons who came to the water impelled by hunger, for lack of more productive employment.

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[1] Arroba=a *weight* of 25 lbs., or a *measure* of 32 pints.
[2] Dollars.

The pride of these enemies rankled in Tío Paloma's soul, for they considered themselves the earliest settlers of la Albufera. According to them, the inhabitants of Catarroja were the oldest fishermen,—those to whom the glorious king, Don Jaime, after conquering Valencia, gave first privilege to exploit the lake, with the obligation of giving over to the crown the fifth part of the catch.

"What were the folk of Palmar in those days?" they would ironically ask the old boatman. And he grew indignant as he recalled the answer given by the people from Catarroja. Palmar bore its name because in ancient times it had been an islet covered with palmettos. In the early centuries people from Torrente and other places had come down, setting themselves to the broom business; they established themselves upon the island, and after gathering a supply of palmettos for the whole year, would return. Little by little a few families would remain. The broom-makers were converted into fishermen, since fishing was more profitable; and because, as a result of their wandering life, they were more clever and abreast of the world's progress, they invented the *redolíns,* receiving in return for this a special privilege from the monarchs and prejudicing the interests of the folks from Catarroja,—a simple people that had never left the Albufera. . . .

It was a sight to behold, Tío Paloma's indignation when he repeated the enemy's opinions. The people of Palmar, who were the most expert fishermen of the lake, descendants of broom-makers, coming from Torrente and other places, where no eel had ever been bred! . . . . Christ! For less reason than this men slew each other on some bank, with a *fitora.* He knew all about it, and he replied that it was all an infamous lie.

When he was a young man they had named him Warden of the Society, and he had carried off to his home the treasure of the town,—the fishermen's archives: a box filled with big books, ordinances, privileges from monarchs, and accounts, which passed from one Warden to another at each new election, and had for centuries been knocking about from cabin to cabin, always kept underneath the mattress, as if the enemies of Palmar might try to rob it. The old boatman did not know how to read. In his day they never thought of such things, and they had more to eat. But a certain vicar, a friend of his, had during the nights deciphered for him the contents of those pen-scratchings that filled the yellowish pages, and he had easily retained them in his memory. First, the privilege of the glorious Saint Jaime, the slayer of the Moors; for the boatman, in his reverence for the conqueror king, who had given the lake to the fishermen, thought royalty a small matter and made a saint of him. Then came the concessions of Don Pedro, Doña Violante, Don Martin, Don Fernando,—all monarchs and some of them blessed servants of God who remembered the poor; this one had given them the right to cut logs in the Dehesa for the weighting of nets, the other the privilege of using the pine bark for dyeing the meshes,—all had conceded something to the fishermen. Those were other times. The monarchs, excellent persons, were content with a fifth of the annual catch: not as now, when the Ministry of Finance and other inventions of man carried off every three months a half *arroba* of silver for letting them live by a lake that had belonged to their forebears. And when anyone told him that the fifth was equivalent to much more than the famous half *arroba* of silver, Tío Paloma would scratch

his head under his cap, at a loss. Very well: agreed that it was more; but it was not paid in money and it was felt far less.

Then he would return to his mania against the other inhabitants of the lake. It was true that at the beginning there existed no other fishermen in the Albufera than those who dwelt in the shadow of Catarroja's bell-tower. In those days it was impossible to live near the sea. The Barbary pirates were most dangerous near the shore, sweeping everything away, and honest, hard-working people were forced to take shelter in the towns lest their necks be adorned with a chain. But little by little, as times grew more safe, the true fishermen, the genuine,—those who fled the tilling of the soil as a dishonorable abdication, had moved to Palmar, thus avoiding a daily trip of two hours before casting their nets. They loved the lake and that's why they had remained near it. There was no broom-making about it! The inhabitants of Palmar were as old as the others. He had often heard from his grandfather that the family came from Catarroja, and that there must be relatives of theirs there yet, though he did not care to know anything of them.

The proof that they were the oldest and most expert fishermen lay in the invention of the *redolins*: a wonderful invention that the folks of Catarroja had never been able to fathom. Those wretches fished with nets and hooks; most of the days they had to cross their stomachs, and no matter how favorable conditions were, they'd never be anything more than poor people. The folks of Palmar, with their wisdom, had studied the habits of the eels. Noticing that during the night they set out for the sea, and that during the darkness of storms they dash about

like mad, abandoning the lake and making for the canals, they had found it more to their advantage to close the canals with barriers of sunken nets, placing beside them the snares for *mornells* and *monòts,* and the fish, deceived, came swimming right into the nets, without any more work for the fisherman than emptying the contrivances and lowering them anew.

And what an admirable organization was the Society of Palmar! Tío Paloma went into ecstasies over this arrangement of the old fishermen. The lake belonged to the fisherfolk. Everything belonged to everybody; not as on dry land, where men have invented such messes as division of land, placing boundaries and walls, and spouting with pride that "this is thine and this is mine," as if everything wasn't God's, and as if, when they died, they could own any more earth than that which filled their mouths forever.

The Albufera for all the sons of Palmar, without any class distinction; the same for the tramps that spent their day in Cañamèl's tavern as for the chief magistrate, who sent eels far, far off, and was almost as wealthy as the tavern-keeper. But since, if the lake were to be apportioned among them, some places were better than others, they had established the annual drawing, and the good morsels passed from hand to hand. He who today was poverty-stricken might tomorrow be a rich man: thus did the Lord ordain, through the luck of the various participants. He who was destined to be poor, would be poor, but with a window open to let Fortune in if she felt the whim. There was he, who was the oldest inhabitant of Palmar, and expected to round out his century if the devil didn't interfere. He had taken part in more than eighty

drawings; once he drew fifth place, once the fourth; he had never drawn first, but he had no complaint to offer, for he had lived without suffering hunger and without wracking his brains for some way to cheat his neighbor, like the folks who came from the inland towns. Besides, when winter was over, and when the large catches in the *redolíns* were finished, the Warden ordered an *arrastrá,* in which all the fishermen of the Society participated, pooling their nets, their boats and their arms. And this community enterprise, involving an entire town, swept the bottom of the lake with its gigantic mesh of nets, and the product of the huge catch was divided among all the men equally. That was the way men should live, like brothers, lest they be transformed into beasts. And Tío Paloma would finish by saying that it was not without significance that the Lord, when he came upon the earth, preached in lakes that were, more or less, like the Albufera, and did not surround himself with land cultivators, but rather with tench and eel fisheries.

The crowd in the square grew greater and greater. The chief magistrate, with his assistants and the *alguacil,* was in the canal awaiting the vessel that was to bring the representative of the Ministry of Finance from Valencia. The folks from the surrounding country arrived to sanctify the drawing with their presence. The crowd made way for the lieutenant of the carabineers, who came from his solitude at Torre Nueva, between the Dehesa and the sea, on his galloping horse, bespattered with the mud of the canals. He presented himself to the Warden, followed by a sinewy youth who carried on his back the box of the Society's archives. *Pare Miquèl,* the bellicose vicar, with his cassock on his shoulder and his cap askew,

was going from group to group assuring everybody that luck would turn its back upon the fishermen.

Cañamèl, who was not a native of the town, and therefore had no right to take part in the drawing, was nevertheless as deeply interested as the fishermen. He never missed that ceremony. It was there, indeed, that he found his business for the whole year, which compensated for the decline of his smuggling interests. Almost always he who won the first choice was a poor fellow, with no other property than a skiff and a few nets. In order to exploit La Sequiòta considerable equipment was required, as well as several boats and hired sailors; and when the humble chap, overwhelmed by his good fortune, was at a loss how to go about things, Cañamèl would approach him like a good angel. He had the necessary means; he offered his boats, the thousand *pesetas'* worth of new twine for the large barrier nets that were needed to close the canal, and the money necessary for advancing pay. All as assistance to a friend, on account of the affection that the man inspired in him. But as friendship is one thing and business another, he would be content with half of the profits from the catch in return for his aid. In this manner the drawings usually worked to Cañamèl's benefit; he awaited the outcome anxiously, praying that the best choices should not fall to those of Palmar who had money.

Neleta, too, had come to the square, attracted by the proceedings, which furnished one of the liveliest of the town holidays. She came in her best clothes, and looked like a lady from Valencia; La Samaruca, her terrible enemy, stood in the middle of a group, poking fun at her high chignon, her rose-colored suit, her belt with its silver buckle, and her general impression of a "bad woman,"

which scandalized all Palmar, turning the men's heads. Ever since she had become wealthy the attractive blonde had perfumed herself in most violent fashion, as if she were intent upon liberating herself from the stench of mire that enwrapped the lake. She washed her face very seldom, like all the women of the island; her skin was not clean, but it never lacked a layer of powder, and at every step her clothes scattered an overpowering odor of musk, which sent whiffs of voluptuous blessedness through the dilating nostrils of the tavern customers.

There was a great stir amid the crowd. He was already there! . . . . The ceremony was about to begin. And before the multitude passed the *alcalde* with his black-tasseled cane, all his assistants and the delegate from the Ministry of Finance,—a poor employé who was stared at in admiration by all the fishermen (who in confused fashion attributed to him such a power over the Albufera) and at the same time with intense hatred. That was the dandy who swallowed up the half *arroba* of silver!

All slowly climbed the narrow little school staircase, whose width could accommodate but a single person at a time. A couple of carabineers, gun in hand, stood guard at the door so as to prevent the entrance of the women and children, who disturbed the deliberations of the meeting. From time to time the curiosity of the youngsters would make them try to fool the guards, but the carabineers would bring the butt-ends of their guns into play and threaten to thrash the entire gang, which with its hullabaloo was interfering with the solemnity of the drawing.

Above, the assembly was so dense that the fishermen, not being able to find a seat upon the benches, crowded about the balconies. Some, the oldest of them, wore the

red cap of the inhabitants of the Albufera; others covered their heads with the wide-bordered handkerchiefs of the farmer folk, or with palm hats. All were dressed in bright colors, with esparto sandals or barefoot altogether, and from this sweating, packed assembly rose the eternal, viscous, cold stench of amphibians brought up in mud.

On the teacher's platform was the presidential desk. In the center was the envoy from Valencia, dictating to his secretary the opening phrases of the record of proceedings, and at his side the priest, the chief magistrate, the Warden, the lieutenant and other invited guests, among whom figured the physician of Palmar, a poor pariah of the profession, who for five *reales* came sailing three times weekly to cure en masse the wretched sufferers from the tertian fever.

The Warden rose from his seat. Before him lay the account books of the Society,—marvellous hieroglyphics, in which not a single word was written, since the payments were recorded by all manner of symbols. Thus had the ancient Wardens done, who had not known how to write, and thus was the accounting continued. Each page contained the account of a fisherman. There was no inscription of his name at the top, but only the mark that each one placed upon his skiff and his nets, for purposes of identification. One was a cross, the other a pair of shears, the next a coot's bill, Tío Paloma a crescent, and the Warden understood them all, having only to glance at the hieroglyphics to say: "This is So-and-so's account." And on the rest of the page, lines and more lines, each stroke signifying the payment of a month's dues.

The old boatman praised this system of accounting. In this manner everyone could look over his own accounts,

and there were no tricks such as filled those huge tomes of figures and fine handwriting, which were understood only by educated gentlemen.

The Warden, a lively youth with a shaven head and insolent eyes, coughed and spat out several times before speaking. The invited guests, who occupied the platform, leaned back and began to converse among themselves. First the Society affairs were to be discussed, and they could take no part. Those were matters that must be settled among fishermen. The Warden began his speech: *"Caballers! . . . ."*

And he passed his imperious glance over the crowd, imposing silence. Below, in the square, the children were yelling like the damned, and the conversation of the women rose to the hall with a bothersome humming. The chief magistrate sent the *alguacil* out among the folk to quiet them, so that the Warden might continue his speech.

Gentlemen,—plain talk. He had been elected Warden to collect from each one his dues and send every three months to the Treasury about one thousand five hundred *pesetas,* the much-talked of half *arroba* of silver. Very well; things could not go on as they were going. Many were in arrears, and the fishermen best off had to supply that deficit. In order to avoid all this disorder in the future, he proposed that all who were not paid up on the books should be excluded from the drawing.

Part of the public received this suggestion with murmurs of approval. These were the ones who had paid up, and if many of their companions should be excluded from the drawing, their own chances of drawing an early choice would rise. But the majority of the members,—those

who looked most wretched,—protested at the top of their lungs, jumping to their feet in their excitement. It was several minutes before the Warden could make himself heard.

When silence was re-established there arose a sickly man, with a pale face and an unhealthy glint in his eyes. He spoke slowly, in a feeble voice; his words were every now and then cut short by feverish shivering. He was of those who had not paid: perhaps nobody was so much behind as he. In the drawing of the year before he had got one of the last places and he hadn't caught enough to feed his family. In one year he had sailed twice toward Valencia, bearing in the bottom of the boat two white caskets adorned with gold fringe, two trips that had forced him to borrow money. . . . But—ay!—what less can a father do but dress his little ones in the best when they go off on their last journey! . . . . Two little children had died on his hands from not eating enough,—eating ill, as *pare Miquèl,* there present, put it, and afterward he had caught the tertian fever while at work, and this had put him months and months behind. He had not paid because he simply could not. And were they, for this reason, to deprive him of his chance to win a fortune? Did he not belong to the Society of Fishermen, as his father and grandfather before him had done? . . . .

There was a painful silence, amid which could be heard the sobbing of the unhappy fellow, who had fallen exhausted into his seat, his head in his hands, as if ashamed of his confession.

*"No, redeu, no!* No, by God, no!" shouted a trembling voice with a passionate energy that stirred everybody.

It was Tío Paloma who, having jumped to his feet, his

cap shoved tightly down over his head, his eyes flaming with indignation, began to speak post haste, mingling with every other word all the oaths and the curses that were stored in his memory. His old companions pulled his sash to remind him that he must show some respect for the gentlemen on the platform; but he replied with a thrust of his elbow and continued. Much he cared about those puppets,—he, a man who had dealt with heroes and monarchs! . . . . He spoke because he *could* speak. Christ! He was the oldest boatmen of the Albufera, and his words should be taken like gospel. The fathers and grandfathers of all present spoke through his mouth. La Albufera belonged to all,—didn't it?—and it was an outrage to deprive a man of his bread just because he had or hadn't paid the Treasury. Did that lady need the miserable *pesetas* of a poor fisherman to buy her supper with? . . . .

The indignation of the old man was communicated to the public. Many were laughing loudly, forgetting the painful impression of the moment previous.

Tío Paloma recalled that he, too, had been Warden. It was all very well to be harsh toward those wretches who flee from hard work; but as for the poor fellows who do their duty and who can't pay because they are the victims of poverty,—one should open his hands to them. *Cordones!* Were the fishermen of Palmar a band of Moors? No; they were all brothers, and the lake belonged to all. This division of rich and poor was good enough for dry land, for the *labradores,* among whom there are masters and serfs. In the Albufera all were equal: he who did not pay now would pay later; and let those who had more supply the deficit of those who had nothing, for it

had always been that way. . . . Let everybody participate in the drawing!

Tonet gave the signal for the thunderous applause that acclaimed his grandfather. Tío Tòni did not seem to be in full accord with his father's notions, but all the poor fishermen rushed upon the old man, demonstrating their enthusiasm by pulling at his smock and giving him such vehement, hearty, affectionate slaps across the back that they fell upon his wrinkled neck like a shower of blows.

The Warden closed the books with an expression of discouragement. It was the same story every year. With these old folk, who seemed ever young, it was impossible to put the Society's affairs in order. And with a bored air he listened to the excuses offered for not having paid the dues or for having delayed the payment. There were sick persons in the family; they had drawn a bad site; the cursed fever had rendered them unfit to work,—the cursed fever which seemed at night to spy upon them from behind the canebrakes that it might fasten its claws into the flesh of the poor; and all the misery, the sad existence of the unhealthful lagoon went filing by like an endless lamentation.

In order to cut short this infinite exposition of sorrows it was agreed upon to exclude none from the drawing, and the Warden deposited upon the table the skin sack and the labels.

"*Demane la paraula!* I want to speak!" shouted a voice near the entrance.

Who was it wished to begin the speaking all over again, and all the boresome claims? The groups opened and an outburst of laughter greeted the appearance of Sangonera,

who advanced gravely, rubbing his rheumy, drunkard's eyes and making every effort to look dignified enough to take part in the meeting. Having found all the taverns of Palmar deserted, he had made his way into the schoolhouse and thought it necessary to ask for the floor before the drawing began.

*"Que vòls tu?* What do you wish?" asked the Warden ill-humoredly, vexed by this intrusion of the tramp, which, coming on the heels of the debtors' recital of excuses, utterly exhausted his patience.

What did he wish? . . . . He wished to know why his name did not figure in the annual drawings? He had as much right as any other to enjoy a *redolí* in the Albufera. He was the poorest of them all; but had he not been born in Palmar? Hadn't he been baptized in the parish of San Valero, in Ruzafa? Was he not a descendant of fishermen? Then he ought to participate in the drawing.

And the claims of this loafer, who had never cared to touch a net and preferred swimming across the canals to touching a pole with his hand seemed so unheard-of, so grotesque to the fishermen, that they all burst into guffaws.

The Warden answered in a provoked manner. Out of the place, *maltrabaja!* What did the Society care whether his forbears had been honest fishermen, when his father had abandoned the boatman's pole in order to give himself up entirely to idleness, and when the only boatman qualities he could show was that of his having been born in Palmar? Besides, his father had never paid his dues, nor had he; the mark which in former days was used by the Sangoneras on their fishing instruments had many years ago been scratched off the books of the Society.

But the drunkard insisted, alleging his rights amid the rising laughter of the public, until Tío Paloma intervened with his questions. . . . And suppose he were admitted to the drawing, and he got one of the best sites, what would he do with it? How would he work it, if he were not a fisherman and knew nothing about the calling?

The vagabond smiled maliciously. The important thing was to draw the site; the rest he would see to. He would arrange matters so that others should do the work for him, giving him the greater part of the profits. And in his cynical smile vibrated the malignant expression of the first man who deceived his fellow being, making him work so that he himself might live a life of idleness.

Sangonera's frank confession incensed the fishermen. He had really done no more than formulate aloud the silent thought of many, but this simple folk felt itself insulted by the vagabond's cynicism, and thought it saw in him the personification of all those who oppress their poverty. Out with him! Out! Shoved and pinched, he was shown the door, while the young fishermen stamped on the floor and amid general laughter imitated a cat-and-dog fight.

The vicar, Don Miguel, arose in indignation, thrusting forward his gladiator's body, his face congested with anger. What was this? What insolence did they permit themselves before these grave, important personages who presided on the platform? . . . . He'd jump right down from the platform and break some fellow's head! . . . .

As silence at once responded to his threat, the priest sat down, content with his power, and whispered to the lieutenant:

"Do you see? Nobody understands this herd better

than I. You've got to show them the stick from time to time."

More even than *pare Miquèl's* threats, what had established calm was the sight of the Warden handing over to the president the list of the fishermen of the Society, so as to ascertain that all were present.

As many men of Palmar as followed the fishing trade were there. It was enough to be an adult, although one still lived with his father, to figure in the drawing of the *redolins*.

The president read off the names of the fishermen, each of whom answered: "Ave María Purísima" with a certain unction, because of the vicar's presence. Some, the enemies of Father Miguel, answered *"Avant!"* (Here!) enjoying the wry face that the vicar made.

The Warden emptied a sack of grimy leather, almost as old as the Society itself, and the balls rolled upon the tables,—a collection of hollow wooden balls, into which was introduced a piece of paper with the name of the participant.

One after the other the fishermen were called to the desk to receive their ball and a strip of paper on which the name of the man had been written, in case he himself could not write.

It was a sight to behold the precautions which a suspicious cunning forced these poor folks to adopt. The most ignorant of the fishermen went to those who knew how to read to see if it were really their name that was written upon the strip of paper, and only after numerous consultations were they convinced. Moreover, the custom of always being designated by their nicknames caused them to experience a certain hesitancy. Their true names

were employed only on a day such as this, and they wavered, as if uncertain as to whether the names were really theirs.

Then came the greatest precautions of all. Each one hid himself by turning his face to the wall, and as he introduced the slip bearing his name into the hollow ball, he wrapped about it a wisp of straw, placed with it a match, —something that should serve as a means of identification so that his ball should not be changed. Their suspicion accompanied them until the moment in which they deposited the ball into the sack. That fellow who came from Valencia awoke in them the mistrust which a public official always inspires in rural folk.

The drawing was about to begin. The vicar, Don Miguel arose, removed his hat, and all followed his action. They were to pray a *salve*,[1] according to the old tradition; this brought good luck. And for a long time the fishermen, with their caps in their hands and their heads bowed, mumbled the prayer softly.

Absolute silence. The president stirred the leather bag to mix the balls well, and as they struck against each other in the silence, they sounded like a distant hailstorm. A little boy came up the room, passed from one to another over the fishermen's heads, and placed his hand into the sack. The anxiety was intense; all eyes were fixed upon the wooden ball, out of which was painfully being unfolded the slip of paper.

The president read the name, and a certain indecision was to be noted in the assembly, which was accustomed to nicknames and slow to recognize regular names, which were rarely used. Who had won the first

[1] A salutation or prayer to the Virgin.

choice? But Tonet had risen from his seat with a bound, shouting: "Present! . . . ." It was Tío Paloma's grandson! What luck the boy had! . . . . He had won first place in the very first drawing in which he had taken part!

His nearest neighbors congratulated him enviously, but he, with the anxiety of one who does not yet believe in his good fortune, looked only at the president. . . . Might he now name his choice of a fishing site? No sooner had he been answered with an affirmative nod than he named his request: he desired La Sequiòta. And when he saw the clerk write down his choice, he dashed forth like a lightning flash from the place, thrusting everybody aside and pushing away the friendly hands that were stretched out to felicitate him.

Down on the square the crowd was waiting in as intense a silence as that which reigned upstairs. It was the custom for the first winners to jump down at once and spread news of their good luck, waving their hats aloft as a sign of joy. Wherefore, as soon as they caught sight of Tonet come almost rolling down the stairs, they greeted him with loud acclamation.

"It's the Cuban! . . . . It's Tonet with the mustache! *Te el ú! Te el ú! . . . .*"

The women threw themselves upon him with vehemence of emotion, embracing him, weeping, as if they might catch some of his good luck, and recalling his mother. How glad the poor woman would be if she could only see him now! And Tonet, enwrapped in all these skirts, impelled and emboldened by the caressing ovation, instinctively embraced Neleta, who smiled, while her green eyes glittered with contentment.

The Cubano wished to celebrate his triumph. He sent

to Cañamèl's for cases of lemonade and beer for all these women. Let the men drink all they pleased. He was footing the bill! In an instant the square was converted into an encampment. Sangonera, whose activity always stirred at the mention of drink, had seconded the desires of his generous friend, fetching all the old, hard pastry that had long been stored behind the glass show-cases; and he passed from group to group, filling glasses and frequently pausing in his distribution to attend to his own wants.

The winners of the next best locations were now coming down, throwing their hats into the air and shouting *Vítol! Vítol!*"[1] But only their family and their friends grouped about them. All the attention was for Tonet, for number one, who had given the people such a liberal spread.

The fishermen left the schoolhouse. Already some thirty balls had been drawn; there remained now only the bad *redolíns,*—those which gave hardly enough to eat, and the spectators left the place, no longer feeling any interest in the drawing.

Tío Paloma was going from group to group receiving congratulations. For the first time he exhibited satisfaction with his grandson. Hee, hee! . . . Luck always favors rascals; his father had said so before him. There was he with his participation in eighty drawings, and he had never drawn first place, while his grandson, just returned from wandering in distant lands, took part for the first time and drew the grand prize. But after all . . . . it was all in the family. And he glowed with the realization

[1] Hurrah!

that for the coming year he would be the first fisherman in Albufera.

Rendered more affectionate than usual by the good luck, he approached his son, who was as solemn and engrossed as ever. Tono! Good fortune had entered the cabin and it must be taken advantage of! He would help out the young fellow, who didn't know much about fishing, and they'd do an enormous business.

But the aged grandfather was stupefied at the coldness with which his son answered him. Yes; that first place was a bit of good luck, all right, if a man had the tools necessary for its exploitation. They needed more than a thousand *pesetas* for the nets alone. Did they have that much money? . . . .

Tío Paloma smiled. They'd easily find some one to lend it to them. But Tòni, hearing the mention of loans, made a wry face. They owed enough as it was. He suffered not a little from certain Frenchmen established in Catarroja, who sold horses on the instalment plan and advanced money to farmers. He had been forced to seek their aid, first during the years of bad harvests, and now to advance the filling-in of his lake somewhat; even in his dreams he could see those men, garbed in corduroy, jabbering threats and every moment pulling out their terrible account-book, in which they wrote down the debts with their complicated net of interest. He had enough already. When a man finds himself sunk in one bad piece of business, he should save himself as best he could, without seeking another. He had enough with his agricultural debts, and didn't care to involve himself in debts for fishing purposes. His sole desire was to bring his lands to the

level of the water, without becoming further involved.

The boatman turned his shoulder upon his son. And was that creature of his flesh and blood? . . . . He preferred Tonet, with all his indolence. He would get together with his grandson and they would both manage somehow or other to solve the difficulty. The owner of *La Sequiòta* never lacked finances.

Tonet, surrounded by friends, acclaimed by the women, filled with pride because of the passionate glance that Neleta fixed upon him, felt somebody touch him upon the shoulder.

It was Cañamèl, who seemed to envelop him with his affectionate eyes. They must talk something over; not for nothing had they always been such good friends, and the tavern been practically Tonet's second home. There was no need of leaving this for later: business between friends was easily arranged. And they withdrew a few paces, followed by the curious glances of the crowd.

The tavern-keeper went straight to the point. Tonet would not have enough money with which to exploit the site he had won in the drawing. Wasn't that so? . . . . Well, then, here was he, a true friend, ready to help him out, to go into partnership with him. He would give him all he needed.

And as Tonet was silent, not knowing what to reply, the tavern-keeper, interpreting his silence as a refusal, attacked the proposition once more. Were they, or were they not, comrades? Was he thinking of doing as his father had done,—going to those foreigners at Catarroja who sucked the very blood of the poor? He was a friend; he even considered himself in a way a relative, for—what the deuce!—he could not forget that his wife, his

Neleta, had been brought up in the Palomas' cabin,—that many a time they had given her food there, and that she was as fond of Tonet as of a brother.

The greedy tavern-keeper used these recollections with the greatest cunning, insisting upon the fraternal affection that his wife felt for the young man.

Then he had recourse to more heroic methods. If he had any doubts about him, if he did not wish him as an associate in the business, he would call Neleta to convince him. Surely she would succeed in setting him upon the right road. What did he say? . . . . Should he call her?

Tonet, seduced by these proposals, hesitated before accepting. He feared the gossip of the people, and recalled his father's severe advice. He looked about him, as if he might receive an inspiration from the looks of the people, and saw his grandfather, who from a distance was nodding affirmatively to him.

The boatman had guessed what Cañamèl was saying. And he had hit precisely upon the wealthy tavern-keeper as an aid. He encouraged his grandson with renewed gestures. He must not refuse: that was the man they needed.

Tonet reached a decision, and Neleta's husband, guessing his decision from the light in his eyes, hastened to formulate the conditions. He would provide all the necessary investment, and Tonet and his grandfather would do the work. Agreed? . . . .

Agreed. The two men shook hands, and followed by Neleta and Tío Paloma walked toward the tavern to solemnize the contract at a joint meal.

At once the news went circulating about the square.

The Cubano and Cañamèl had joined forces to exploit La Sequiòta!

La Samaruca had to be removed from the square by order of the magistrate. Escorted by several women she went off in the direction of her cabin, roaring like one possessed, calling at the top of her lungs to her sister, who had died years before, shouting vociferously that Cañamèl was a shameless wretch, and that for the sake of driving a good bargain he had not hesitated to introduce into his house his own wife's lover.

## V

TONET'S position in Cañamèl's establishment changed completely. No longer was he a mere customer. He was the partner, the companion of the place's proprietor, and entered the tavern whenever he pleased, defying with proud attitude the gossip of Neleta's enemies.

If he spent entire days there, it was for the purpose of discussing business. He entered most confidently the inner rooms, and to show that he was as much at home as in his own house, he would get behind the counter and sit down at Cañamèl's side. Many a time, if he and his wife went within, and some customer should ask for something, Tonet would leap to the bar and with comic gravity, amid the laughter of his friends, serve the various articles, imitating the voice and the mannerisms of Tío Paco.

The tavern-keeper was well content with his associate. An excellent youth, as he declared before the tavern gathering when Tonet was not present; a good friend, who, if he would only act right and stick to business, would go far, very far, seeing that he could count upon the aid of so powerful a patron as the speaker.

Tío Paloma, too, frequented the tavern more than before. The family, after stormy scenes at night in the solitude of the cabin, had divided into two factions. Tío Tòni and La Borda went off to their fields every morning to continue their battle against the lake, trying to sink

it beneath the mounds of earth they brought so painfully from far away. Tonet and his grandfather went to Cañamèl's house to talk about their joint enterprise, soon to start.

In truth, the only ones who discussed the business were the tavern-keeper and Tío Paloma. Cañamèl praised himself, lauding the generosity with which he had accepted the partnership. He was exposing his capital without any foreknowledge of the year's catch, and was making this sacrifice content with but half of the proceeds. He was not like the foreign money-lenders of the mainland, who gave money only on excellent security and usurious interest. And all his hatred against the intruders, the ferocious rivalry in the exploitation of one's neighbors, vibrated in his words. Who were those people who little by little were getting the country into their clutches? Frenchmen who had come to Valencian territory in torn shoes and an old corduroy suit sticking to their skin. People from some province of France whose name he couldn't recall, but who had become more or less the *gallegos* of their country. Even the money that they loaned out was not their own. In France, capital produced very little interest, and these *gabachos* got it from their own country at two or three per cent to lend it to the Valencians at fifteen to twenty, thus realizing an excellent profit. Moreover, they bought horses on the other side of the Pyrenees, perhaps smuggling them across the border, and sold them on the instalment plan to the farmers, arranging the sale in such a manner that the purchaser never acquired complete ownership of the animal. There was one poor fellow who had paid as much for a worn-out old nag as if it had been the very horse of Saint James. Robbery, Tío

Paloma; robbery unworthy of Christians! And Cañamèl, speaking of these matters, would grow furious, with all the indignation and the secret envy of the usurer who is too cowardly to employ the methods of his competitors.

The boatman approved his words. That's why he preferred to have his family devoted to fishing, and that's why he grew angry to see his son contracting debts and more debts, in his absurd insistence upon being an agriculturalist. The poor farmers were nothing but slaves; all the year long they worked themselves bare to the bone, and to whom did all the profit go? It was the foreigners who carried off all the harvests: the Frenchman who loaned them the money and the Englishman who sold them the fertilizer on credit. . . . The idea of living a life of unremitting toil in order to support foreigners! No, while there were eels in the lake, let the lands be quietly covered with reeds and bulrushes, in the certainty that he would not be the one to break them up.

While the boatman and Cañamèl would converse, Tonet and Neleta, seated behind the counter, would gaze quietly at each other. The customers had become accustomed to seeing them hours and hours thus, exchanging glances as if they could devour each other; with an expression upon their countenances that did not correspond to their words, which were often of no significance. The gossipy old women who came for oil or wine remained motionless before them, with lowered glance and a silly look upon their faces, waiting till the very last drops came through the funnel into the bottle, while they cocked their ears to catch some word of the conversation; but the youth and the woman defied this espionage and continued speaking, as if they were in a deserted spot.

Tío Paloma, alarmed by such intimacy, spoke seriously to his grandson. But could it really be that there was something between them, as La Samaruca and other evil tongues of the town maintained? Beware, Tonet! In addition to being unworthy of his family, it would mean the ruin of their business! But the grandson, with the firmness of one who speaks the truth, struck his chest and protested, so that the grandfather was convinced, although he felt a certain presentiment that such a friendship would have a bad end.

The narrow space behind the counter was for Tonet a paradise. He would recall with Neleta their childhood days; he would tell her his adventures yonder across the seas, and when they were silent, he would feel a sweet intoxication (the same as on that night in which they had been lost in the forest, only more intense, more ardent) at the proximity of that body whose warmth seemed to caress him through the clothes.

At night, after supping with Cañamèl and his wife, Tonet would take out of his cabin an accordeon,—the only thing he had brought along with him from Cuba besides the straw hats,—and would entertain everybody in the tavern with the languid *habaneras* that he made the instrument whine. He would sing *guajiras* of a sweet, sentimental poesy, in which there was frequent reference to zephyrs, harps and hearts as tender as the guayaba; and the mellifluous Cuban accent in which he sang the songs made Neleta close her eyes dreamily, throwing back her body that she might relieve the pain in her bosom, trembling with restrained emotion.

On the day following these serenades Neleta, with

moistened eyes, would follow Tonet all about the tavern from group to group.

The Cubano guessed what was going on within her. She had dreamed of him, hadn't she? The same thing had happened to Tonet in his cabin. All night long, stretching out his hands as if he were about to grasp her, he could see her in the darkness. And after this mutual confession they would remain quiet; certain of a moral possession which they could not exactly have explained; certain that at last they must of necessity belong to each other, however many obstacles might arise between them.

Within the town they could think of no other intimacy than the tavern conversations. All Palmar surrounded them during the day, and Cañamèl, sick and complaining, never left the house. Sometimes, moved by a passing flash of activity, the tavern-keeper would whistle to *Centella,* an old dog with a huge head, famous throughout the lake region for his remarkable sense of smell, and placing him in the boat would go out to the nearest islets of sedge to shoot coots. But after a few hours he would return coughing, complaining of the dampness, with his legs swollen like those of an elephant, as he said; he would get into a corner and not stop groaning until Neleta made him sip some glasses of hot liquids, tying several kerchiefs about his head and his neck. Neleta's eyes would glance toward the Cubano with an expression that clearly showed the scorn she felt for her husband.

The summer was coming to a close and serious thought must be given to preparations for the fishing. Before their houses the owners of the other *redolíns* were arranging the large nets for the barring of the canals. Tío

Paloma was impatient. The contrivances that Cañamèl had,—which had been left over from his previous association with other fishermen,—were not enough for La Sequiòta. They needed to purchase a great deal of twine, and give employment to many women who make nets, if they were going to exploit the *redolí* adequately.

One night Tonet and his grandfather were having supper in the tavern and talking their business over seriously. They must buy better twine,—the kind that was made on the beach of Cabanal for the sea fishermen. Tío Paloma would go to buy it, as he was an expert, but the tavern-keeper would accompany him, as he wished to pay for the material directly, fearing that he might be cheated if he gave the money to the old boatman. Afterward, during the beatitude of digestion, Cañamèl began to feel terrified at the prospect of the next day's trip. He would have to rise at dawn, plunging from a warm bed into the cold mist; then he would have to cross the lake, go by land to Valencia, thence to Cabanal, and afterwards, make the whole journey back again. His massive body, flabby from inactivity, shuddered at thought of the trip. This man, who had spent a large part of his life wandering over the world, had taken such deep root in the mud of Palmar, that he grew excited at thought of a day's activity.

The desire for ease made him modify his proposal. He would remain in charge of the establishment and Neleta would accompany Tío Paloma. There was nobody like the women when it came to chaffering and getting things at the right price.

On the following morning the boatman and the tavern-keeper's wife started out on their trip. Tonet was to

await them in the harbor of Catarroja at dusk, to take on the cargo of twine in his boat.

The sun was still quite high when the Cubano entered, with sail widespread, the canal that penetrated into the land in the direction of the town where he was to meet the other two. The large barges were coming from the threshing-floors laden with cargoes of rice, and as they passed through the canal, the water they cut with their hulls formed behind the stern a yellow wake, which invaded the banks and disturbed the crystalline clearness of the tributary channels.

At one side of the canal were moored hundreds of boats; the entire fleet of the fishermen of Catarroja, so wildly hated by Tío Paloma. They were black coffins, of various sizes and all of decayed wood. The tiny craft, called *zapatos*,[1] reared their sharp points above the water and the large vessels, the barges, which could take on a cargo of a hundred sacks of rice, sank their broad paunches into the aquatic vegetation, forming against the horizon a forest of coarse, unplaned, flat-topped masts, fitted out with mat-weed rigging.

Between this fleet and the opposite bank there was left but a narrow space, through which sailed the boats, their prows colliding violently with the moored craft.

Tonet moored his boat before the harbor tavern and went ashore.

He saw huge heaps of rice straw, amid which the hens were scratching, making the wharf look like a poultry yard. On the bank carpenters were constructing small boats, and the echo of their hammers was lost in the calm of the afternoon. The new craft, of recently planed yel-

[1] Shoes.

low wood, were placed upon benches, awaiting the coats of liquid pitch with which the calkers covered them. In the doorway of the tavern two women were sewing. Beyond rose a thatched cottage wherein was situated the scale of the Catarroja Society. A woman with a balance formed of two buckets was weighing the eels and the tenches that the fishermen were unloading, and after the weighing was finished she would throw an eel into a large basket that lay beside her. This was the voluntary contribution of the Catarroja folk. The proceeds from this tax went to pay the expenses of the feast of their patron saint, Peter. Some carts laden with rice drew off, creaking, in the direction of the large mills.

Tonet, with some time on his hands, was about to enter the tavern when he heard someone call him. From behind one of the large barns, scaring off the hens, who scattered in every direction, a hand was making signs for him to approach.

The Cubano answered the call and found there, stretched out, with his chest exposed and his arms crossed behind his head like a pillow, the vagabond Sangonera. His eyes were bleary and yellow; around his face, which was growing gradually more pale and thin from alcoholic over-indulgence, buzzed a swarm of flies, nor did he exert the slightest effort to frighten them away.

Tonet was happy at this encounter, which could entertain him during his wait. What was he doing there? . . . . Nothing; spending the time until nightfall. He was waiting for the hour at which he was to meet certain friends from Catarroja, who would not let him go supperless; he was taking it easy, and resting was the best occupation of man.

He had seen Tonet from his place and had called him, without abandoning his magnificent posture. His body had fitted perfectly into the straw, and he didn't care to lose the impress of the position. . . . Afterwards he explained why he was there. He had eaten in the tavern with some carters,—excellent chaps,—who had given him a few crumbs, passing him the mug at each bite and laughing at his pleasantries. But no sooner had the customers left than the tavern-keeper, like all those of his class, showed him the door, knowing that he would order nothing on his own account. And there he was, killing time, which is man's enemy. . . . Were they friends or not? Would he invite him to a drink?

Tonet's affirmative nod overcame the tramp's laziness, and though with a certain pain, he decided to get up on his feet. They had a drink in the tavern, and then, slowly, they walked to a place on a bank that was shielded from the harbor by black boards.

Tonet had not seen Sangonera for many days, and the vagabond recounted his troubles.

There was nothing for him to do in Palmar. Neleta, Cañamèl's wife, was a haughty woman altogether too forgetful of her origin; she had sent him away from the tavern on the pretext that he dirtied the chairs and the tiles of the wainscoating with the mud from his clothes. In the other taverns things were wretched indeed: all poverty-stricken, and never a drinker came that could treat a fellow; so that he had been forced to quit Palmar, to wander about the lake towns, as his father had done of old; to go from place to place, ever in quest of generous friends.

Tonet, whose laziness had so disgusted his own family,

had the effrontery to offer advice. Why didn't he go to work?. . . .

Sangonera made a gesture of stupefaction. He, too! . . . . The Cubano, too, allowed himself to repeat the same advice as the old folks of Palmar! Did he himself care so much for work? Why wasn't he with his father, then, filling in the fields, instead of idling the day away at Cañamèl's, at Neleta's side, sitting back at his ease like a gentleman and drinking of the best? . . .

The Cubano smiled, not knowing what to answer and he admired the logic of the drunkard in his rejection of the advice.

The tramp seemed to have been softened by the glass that Tonet had paid for. The calm of the harbor, interrupted by the hammering of the calkers and the clucking of the hens, excited his loquacity, impelling him to impart confidences.

No, Tonet, he could not work; he would never work, even though they tried to compel him. Toil was the invention of the devil: a disobedience of God; the most serious of sins. Only corrupt souls, those who could not adapt themselves to their poverty, those who lived tormented by the desire of hoarding, even if it were poverty, thinking forever of the morrow, could give themselves up to work, converting themselves from men into beasts. He had given much thought to the matter; he knew far more than the Cubano imagined, and he didn't wish to lose his soul by devoting himself to regular, monotonous labor in order to have a house and a family and assure himself bread for the following day. That was to doubt the mercy of God, who never abandons His creatures; and he was above all a Christian.

Tonet laughed to hear these words, considering them the rambling chatter of intoxication, and nudged his tattered companion. If he expected another glass for all this nonsense, he was mistaken! What he thought was that the tramp hated work. The same held true of the others, but in varying degree; everybody bent his back, although it might be most unwillingly.

Sangonera let his gaze wander across the surface of the canal, which was tinted purple by the waning light of the afternoon. His thoughts seemed to wing far away: he spoke slowly, with a certain mysticism that contrasted with his alcoholic breath.

Tonet was an ignoramus, like everybody else in Palmar. This he declared, with the courage of intoxication, without any fear that his friend, who was quick-tempered, would give him such a shove that he'd go rolling into the canal. Hadn't he just said that all bent their backs unwillingly? And what did this prove but that work is something contrary to nature and to the dignity of man? . . . . He knew more than folks in Palmar gave him credit for: more than many of the vicars whom he had served like a slave. That's why he had always wrangled with them. He possessed the truth, and he could not dwell with the blind in spirit. While Tonet had been wandering in those lands across the sea, mixed up in battles, he had been reading the priests' books and passing the afternoons at the door of the presbytery, reflecting upon the open pages, amid the silence of a town whose populace had fled to the lake. He had committed to memory almost all the New Testament, and he seemed to tremble as he recalled reading the Sermon on the Mount for the first time. It seemed to him then that

a cloud had been rent before his very eyes. All at once he had understood why his will rebelled before stultifying, painful labor. It was the flesh, it was sin that made men live in the degredation of beasts, for the satisfaction of their earthly appetites. The soul protested against such servitude, saying to man: "Toil not," and the sweet intoxication of indolence was diffused through his limbs, like a foretaste of that felicity which awaits the good in heaven.

"*Ascolta, Tonet, ascolta.* Listen, Tonet, listen to me," said Sangonera to his friend in solemn accents.

And he recalled in disordered fashion all his evangelical readings; the precepts that had remained imprinted in his memory. He did not have to ask anxiously for food and clothing, for, as Jesus had said, the birds of the air neither sow nor reap, yet despite this, they eat; nor do the lilies of the field need to spin for their clothes, for they are clothed by the grace of the Lord. He was a creature of God and entrusted himself into His hands. He did not wish to insult the Lord by working, as if he doubted that the divine bounty would aid him. Only the heathens, or what amounted to the same thing, the folk of Palmar, who hoarded all the money they made in fishing without ever inviting a fellow to drink, were capable of toiling away for the sole purpose of laying aside, ever doubtful of the morrow.

He wished to be like the birds of the lake, like the flowers that grew in the reed-grass,—free, idle, and with no other recourse than divine Providence. In his poverty he never doubted the morrow. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." The coming day would bring its ills. For the moment he was content with the bit-

terness of the present: poverty, which gave him his intention to maintain himself pure, without the slightest stain of work or of earthly ambition in a world where everybody fought his neighbors in the struggle for existence, each one injuring and sacrificing his fellow-man in order to rob him of a little comfort.

Tonet listened laughingly to the words of the drunkard, uttered with a growing exaltation. He banteringly expressed admiration of his ideas and suggested that he leave the lake and enter a monastery, where he would not have to battle against poverty. But Sangonera protested indignantly.

He had quarrelled with the vicar, leaving the presbytery forever, because he could not endure beholding in his former friends a spirit utterly contrary to that of the books they read. They were like the others: they lived consumed by the desire for the other fellow's *peseta,* thinking only of food and clothing, and complaining of the decline of piety when no money came into the house, worrying every morning, doubting the bounty of God, who does not forsake His creatures.

He had faith and lived on what he was given or what he found at hand. Never had he lacked at night a handful of straw on which to lay his head, nor had he been utterly famished. The Lord, on sending him into the lake region, had placed within his reach all the requirements of life, that he might be the model of a true believer.

Tonet mocked at Sangonera. Since he was so pure, why then did he get drunk? Did God order him to go from tavern to tavern, afterward crawling over the banks almost on all fours, with the staggering gait of the drunk-

ard? . . . But the vagabond did not lose his solemn dignity. His drunkenness did nobody any harm, and wine was a sacred thing: not for nothing did it serve in the daily sacrifice to the deity. The world was beautiful, but when seen through a glass of wine it appeared more smiling than ever, of more brilliant hue, and its powerful Creator was admired more fervently than ever.

Each one has his own amusements. He found no greater pleasure than to contemplate the beauty of the Albufera. Others worshipped money, while he sometimes wept at the beauty of a sunset, as its fires were scattered by the dampness of the air, during that hour of dusk which was, on the lake, more mysterious and beautiful than inland. The beauty of the landscape entered his very soul, and if he contemplated it through several glasses of wine, he sighed with all the tenderness of a little boy. He repeated it: each one has his own amusements. Cañamèl, for example, delighted in heaping up golden coins: he, in contemplating the lake of Albufera with such rapture that his head hummed with verses prettier far than the ones they sang in the taverns, and he was convinced that, if he were like those city gentlemen who write for the papers, he would be able to say some mighty fine things in his drunken moments.

After a long silence Sangonera, spurred on by his very loquacity, raised objections to his own arguments, only to refute them at once. It might be said to him, as a certain vicar of Palmar once had objected, that man was condemned to earn his bread in the sweat of his brow, as a result of his first sin: but it was for this very reason that Jesus had come upon earth, to redeem him from the first fault, returning mankind to its Paradisiacal life,

free of all labor. But ay! The sinners, goaded on by pride, had not heeded his words: each wished greater comfort than the others; there were poor and rich, instead of all being men: those who paid no attention to the Lord worked hard, very hard, but Humanity was unhappy, and made for itself hell upon earth. Let them try to tell him that if folks didn't work they'd have a hard time of it! Very well; there would be less in the world, but those who remained would be happy and carefree, subsisting on the inexhaustible grace of God. . . . . And this was perforce so: the world would never be a place of equality. Jesus would have to come back, to redirect men upon the right path. He had often dreamt of it, and on certain occasions when he was ill with swamp fever and when the chills attacked him, stretched out on a bank or crouching in a corner of his ramshackle cabin, he could see His tunic, purple, tightly gathered, rigid, and he would stretch out his arms to touch it and be at once cured.

Sangonera revealed an abiding faith when he spoke of this return to the earth. He would not appear in the large cities that were dominated by the vice of wealth. The other time He had not come to that vast city called Rome, but had preached in little places no larger than Palmar, and his companions were men of the pole and the net, of the sort that gathered in Cañamèl's house. That lake upon whose waters Jesus had walked, to the amazement of his apostles, certainly was no greater in extent nor any more beautiful than the lake of Albufera. There among them would the Lord come when He should return to the world to finish His work; He would seek out the simple hearts, clean of all covetousness; he, Sangonera,

would be one of the Lord's own. And the tramp, with an exaltation compounded of both drunkenness and his own strange belief, would draw himself erect and gaze at the horizon; on the edge of the canal, where the last rays of the sun were falling, he imagined he saw the slender figure of the Desired One, like a purple line, advancing without moving His legs nor brushing against the plants, with a halo of light that would shine around His gently curling golden locks.

Tonet no longer heard him. From the road to Catarroja came the loud ringing of bells, and behind the fishermen's weighing-cabin the wrinkled cover of a van came into view. It was his people arriving. With the powerful sight that characterized the children of the lake Sangonera recognized Neleta from a long distance, in the little window of the vehicle. Ever since he had been thrown out of the tavern, he would have nothing to do with Cañamèl's wife. He took leave of Tonet and stretched himself out anew in the barn, entertaining himself with his fancies until the night should come.

The carriage stopped before the little harbor tavern and Neleta stepped out. The Cubano did not conceal his astonishment. Where was the grandfather? . . . . He had let her make the return trip alone, with the entire cargo of twine, which filled the van. The old fellow wished to return home by way of Saler, so that he might see a certain widow who sold *palangres* cheap. He would return to Palmar at night on one of the boats that dredged up mud from the canals.

As they glanced at each other the two were assailed by the same thought. They were going to make the trip alone: for the first time they were to be able to speak

with each other, far from all curious glances, amid the deep solitude of the lake. And both grew pale, as if in the presence of a danger that they had a thousand times desired, which had all at once, unexpectedly presented itself. Such was their emotion, that they did not hasten their gait, as if they were dominated by a strange bashfulness and feared the comments of the harbor folk, who were scarcely paying any attention to them.

The driver had finished taking all the thick bundles of twine out of the vehicle, and, with the aid of Tonet, was throwing them into the prow of the boat, where they formed a yellowish heap from which came the smell of new-spun hemp.

Neleta paid the driver. Good health and a fine trip! And the man, snapping his whip, drove his horse off in the direction of Catarroja.

The two remained for an appreciable while motionless on the mud bank, without daring to embark, as if they were awaiting someone.

The calkers called to the Cubano. He ought to set sail very soon: the wind was going to die down, and if he was going to Palmar, he would have to help the boat along with the pole for a good while. Neleta, visibly perturbed, smiled to all the folk of Catarroja, who greeted her, having seen her in her tavern.

Tonet decided to break the silence, turning to Neleta. Since the grandfather wasn't going along, they had better set sail as soon as possible. His voice was already hoarse, as if his emotion were gripping his throat.

Neleta sat down in the center of the boat, at the foot of the mast, using as a seat a heap of skeins that sunk beneath her weight. Tonet tended the sail, squatting be-

fore the helm, and the boat commenced to glide along, the sail fluttering against the mast with the tremors of the soft, waning breeze.

They passed slowly through the canal, seeing, by the departing light of the afternoon, the isolated cabins of the fishermen, garlanded with the nets placed out to dry upon the yard fences, and the old water-wheels, of decayed wood, around which the bats were beginning to fly. The fishermen walked along the banks, pulling laboriously at their skiffs, towing them along with their sashes tied to the end of the ropes.

"Good-bye!" they murmured, as they passed along.

"Good-bye! . . . ."

And once again, silence, accompanied by the murmuring of the boat as it cut the waters, and the monotonous croaking of the frogs. The two kept their eyes lowered, as if they feared to realize that they were alone, and as if on raising their eyes and meeting each other's glance, they would flee it on the instant.

The shores of the canal were now wider apart. The banks were lost in the water. On each side extended the large lagoons of the fields that were to be filled in. Over the smooth surface the reeds swayed in the twilight, like the crest of a submerged forest.

They were already in the lake of Albufera. They advanced somewhat farther with the dying gusts of the breeze; around them they could see only water.

The wind was no longer blowing. The lake, tranquil and unruffled, assumed a soft opal hue, reflecting the waning splendor of the sun behind the distant mountains. The sky was of violet, and was beginning to be pierced here and there in the direction of the sea by the gleaming

of the first stars. Near where the water met the land the drooping, motionless sails of the boats stood out like phantoms.

Tonet lowered sail and, taking the pole, began to move the boat along with the power of his arms. The silence of the twilight was broken.

Neleta, with a sonorous laugh, stood up, wishing to help her companion. She, too, could pole a boat. Tonet must recall their childhood days together, their strenuous, mischievous games, when they would loosen the skiffs of Palmar without the knowledge of the owners and scurry along the canals, often having to flee from the pursuing fishermen. When he would get tired, she would take his place.

"*Estate queta.* . . . Be quiet," he replied, his breath cut short by his effort; and he kept on poling.

But Neleta would not be quiet. As if she were oppressed by that dangerous silence, in which their glances shunned each other as though fearing to reveal their thoughts, the young woman continued to talk vivaciously.

Far off in the distance, like a fantastic shore that they were never to reach, stood out the notched line of the Dehesa. Neleta, with incessant laughter in which there was something forced, reminded her friend of the night they had spent in the forest, and of all their fears and later their tranquil sleep; that adventure seemed to have taken place only the day before; so fresh was it in her memory.

But her companion's silence, his gaze fixed at the bottom of the boat with an anxious expression, called her attention. Then she noticed that Tonet was devouring with his eyes her small, elegant, russet shoes, which stood out against the hemp like two bright stains, and some-

thing more that the movements of the boat had brought to view. She hastened to lower her skirt and remained silent, her mouth compressed by a hard look, her eyes almost closed, while a painful wrinkle could be noted between her eyebrows. Neleta seemed to be making every effort to master herself.

They advanced slowly. It was a difficult task to cross the lake of Albufera in a loaded boat moved only by might of strength. Other little empty skiffs, containing only the man at the pole, shot by as swiftly as a shuttle, being soon lost in the growing shadows.

For almost an hour Tonet had been working the heavy pole which sometimes slipped on the compact bed of shells and at others was caught in the vegetation of the bottom, which the fishermen called the hair of the Albufera. It could easily be seen that he was not accustomed to such work. If he had been alone in the boat he would have stretched himself out in the bottom, waiting for the wind to return or for some other craft to tow him in. But Néleta's presence awoke in him a certain sense of pride, and he did not care to stop until he should fall exhausted with fatigue. He was breathing heavily as he leaned against the pole to propel the boat. Without letting go of it, he would from time to time bring his arm to his forehead and wipe off the sweat.

Neleta called to him in a soft, tender voice, in which there was something maternal.

Only her shadow could be seen upon the heap of skeins that filled the prow. She wished him to take a rest: he ought to stop for a moment; it made no difference if they should come a half hour sooner or later.

And she made him sit down beside her, suggesting that

it would be far more comfortable on the heap of hemp than at the stern.

The boat came to a stop. Tonet, recovering his strength, felt the sweet proximity of the woman, just as when he would sit beside her behind the tavern bar.

Night had fallen. There was no other light than the scattered glow of the stars, which trembled in the dark waters. The deep silence was interrupted by the mysterious noises of the stream, which was aquiver with the darting of invisible creatures. The *lubinas,* coming from the direction of the sea, were pursuing the small fishes, and the black surface shuddered with a continuous *chap-chap* of disordered flight. In a nearby *mata* the coots uttered their plaints, as if they were being slain, while the *buxqueròts* sang their endless scales.

Tonet, amid this silence peopled with noises and songs, imagined that time had not passed at all,—that he was still a youngster and was in one of the forest glades, at the side of his childhood chum. Now he felt no fear: the one thing that intimidated him was the mysterious warmth of his companion, the intoxicating perfume that seemed to emanate from her body, rising to his head like a strong liquor.

With bowed head, not daring to raise his eyes, he thrust forth an arm, placing it about Neleta's waist. Almost at the same moment he felt a soft caress, a velvety touch, a hand that glided from his head along his forehead and dried the perspiration that still bedewed it.

He lifted his glance and beheld, at a short distance, in the obscurity, a pair of eyes that shone fixedly upon him, reflecting the light of a distant star. Upon his temples he felt the titillating contact of the blond, silken tresses

that surrounded Neleta's head like a nimbus. Those pungent perfumes with which the tavern-keeper's wife saturated herself, seemed all at once to enter the innermost recesses of his being.

"Tonet, Tonet!" she murmured in a weak voice, like a tender cry.

The same as in the Dehesa! . . . . But now they were no longer children; that innocence which had made them cling to each other and thus seek to gather new courage had disappeared.

The boat remained motionless in the center of the lake, as if it were an abandoned hulk, and not the slightest sign of a silhouette stood out against its gunwales.

From nearby came the languorous song of some boatmen. They were poling their boats over the water that was peopled with murmurs without any suspicion that, only a short distance away, amid the night's calm, lulled by the birds of the lake, Love, the sovereign of the world, was enthroned on a few mean planks.

## VI

THE day of Palmar's great festival came, the *fiesta* of the Infant Jesus.

It was in December. Across the lake of Albufera blew an icy wind that made the hands of the fishermen numb, freezing them to the pole. The men wore woolen caps pulled down over their ears, and did not remove their yellow storm-coats, which, as they walked along, swished like silken skirts. The women rarely left the cabins: all the families sat about the hearth, tranquilly dwelling in a dense, smoky atmosphere like that of an Eskimo hut.

The lake had risen. The winter rains had swollen the waters, and fields and banks were covered by a liquid cloak, mottled here and there by the submerged plants. The lake seemed vaster. The isolated cabins, which before had been on solid ground, now seemed to float on the waters, and the boats were moored at the very doors.

From the soil of Palmar, damp and muddy, there appeared to rise a raw, unbearable cold, which kept folks in their houses. The old gossips of the town could not recall so cruel a winter. The Moorish sparrows, restless and rapacious, shrunken with the cold, fell from the straw roofs with a pitiful cry like the wail of a child. The guards of the [illegible] pretended short-sightedness before the necessities [illegible]y, and every morning a veritable army of gamins would scatter through the forest, seeking dry wood with which to heat their cabins.

Cañamèl's customers grouped about the fireplace and would leave their mat-weed chairs near the fire only to go to the bar for another drink.

All Palmar seemed benumbed and drowsy. There were no people in the street, no boats upon the lake. The men went out only to gather the fish that had been caught in the nets during the night, and returned as fast as they could to the town. Their feet looked huge, wrapped in bulky woolen cloths within their esparto sandals. The bottoms of the boats were strewn with rice straw to protect against the cold. Many a day, at dawn, broad sheets of ice would be seen floating in the canal, like panes of frosted glass. Everybody had succumbed to the weather. They were the children of warmth, accustomed to seeing the lake boil and the fields exhale their fetid breath under the caress of the sun. Even the eels, as Tío Paloma announced, didn't care to lift their heads out of the mud in such awful weather. And to make matters worse every little while there was a torrential downpour of rain, darkening the lake and overflowing the smaller canals. The gray sky made the Albufera dreary. The boats that sailed along in the dense mists looked even more like coffins, their men standing motionless in the straw, bundled up to the nose in thick, ragged old clothes.

But when Christmas season came, with its *fiesta* of the Infant Jesus, Palmar seemed to come back to life, shaking off the winter torpor into which it had sunk.

They must have the same good time as usual, even if the lake were to freeze over hard enough to walk on, as one said happened in distant countries. More even than by the desire for amusement, they were impelled by the wish to annoy their rivals, the folk of the mainland,

those fishermen of Catarroja, who scoffed at the Infant of Palmar, scorning his diminutive size. These infidel, conscienceless enemies even went so far as to say that the people of Palmar ducked their patron saint in the waters of the canals when the fishing wasn't good. What sacrilege! . . . . That was why the Infant Jesus punished their sinful tongues, not permitting them to enjoy the privilege of the *redolins*.

All Palmar prepared for the celebration. The women defied the cold, crossing the lake to reach Valencia for the Christmas fair. When they returned in their husband's boats, the impatient youngsters were already waiting for them at the canal, anxious to see their presents. The cardboard horses, the tin swords, the drums and the trumpets were received with exclamations of enthusiasm by the little ones, while the women exhibited to their friends their more important purchases.

The Christmas fiesta lasted four days. On the second, the music from Catarroja arrived, and the heaviest eel of the year's catch was raffled off, the proceeds going to pay expenses. The third day was given to the celebration of the Infant Jesus, and on the day following occurred the feast of Christ; all this accompanied by masses and sermons and dances at night to the music of tabor and flageolet.

Neleta proposed this year to enjoy herself at the festivities as never before. Her happiness was complete. She seemed to live in a perpetual spring behind the tavern bar. When she supped, with Cañamèl on one side and the Cubano on the other, all three tranquil and content, in a sacred, family peace, she considered herself the happiest of women and praised the bounty of the Lord, who

permits good people to live happily. She was the richest and prettiest woman of the town; her husband was satisfied; Tonet, submissive to her will, was falling more and more in love with her. . . . What else could she ask for? She told herself that the grand ladies she had seen from a distance on her trips to Valencia could surely not be so happy as she on that little corner of mud at the water's edge.

Her enemies murmured; La Samaruca spied on her: for the purpose of being alone without rousing suspicion, she and Tonet had been forced to invent reasons for trips to the lake towns nearby. It was Neleta who did all the scheming in this connection, with such cleverness that the Cubano could not help wondering whether there were some truth to certain rumors about her previous love-affairs, which probably explained her skill in such wiles. But the tavern-keeper's wife was little worried by the slanderous gossip. What her enemies were saying now was the same as they had said when nothing more than indifferent words had been exchanged between her and Tonet. And with the certainty that nobody could prove her delinquency, she scorned all gossip, and before the customers in the tavern she would jest with Tonet in a manner that scandalized Tío Paloma. Neleta pretended that she was offended. Hadn't they been brought up together? Couldn't she like Tonet as a brother, in remembrance of all his mother had done for her?

Cañamèl assented, praising his wife's good nature. What the tavern-keeper did not look upon with quite so much approval was Tonet's conduct as a partner. That youth had received his good fortune as if it were a lottery prize; he went about having a good time, like one

who does nobody any harm and consumes only what belongs to him, without giving a thought to fishing.

The site of La Sequiòta was giving good returns. There weren't any of the fabulous catches of former days, but there were nights in which the catch came very close to a hundred *arrobas* of eels, and Cañamèl enjoyed the satisfactions of good business, haggling over prices with the city dealers, watching the scales and witnessing the loading of the large baskets. As far as that was concerned, the company was a great success, but he liked a fair deal: let each one perform his share of the work without taking advantage of the others.

He had promised his money and he had given it; the nets, the tackle and all the net-sacks, which could form a heap as large as the tavern itself, were all his. But Tonet had promised to help in the work, and it might be said that he had not caught so much as a single eel with his sinful hands.

During the first nights he had gone to the *redolí,* and, seated in the boat with a cigar stuck in his mouth, had watched his grandfather and the hired fishermen empty the huge net-sacks in the darkness, filling the bottom of the boat with eels and tenches. After these first few nights, he did not even do that much. He was not fond of dark, stormy nights, on which the waters are choppy and the best fishing is done; he wasn't fond of the work necessary to pull in the heavy, laden nets; he felt a certain revulsion to the sliminess of the eels as they slid through his hands, and preferred to remain at the tavern or to go to sleep in his cabin. Cañamèl, in order to provide him with a good example and by his own actions shame the youth out of his indolence, decided to go to the *redolí*

several nights, coughing away and complaining of his pains; but the cursed lazybones, noticing this, seemed only the more determined to stay away, even getting so brazen as to say that Neleta would be afraid to remain alone in the tavern.

The truth was that Tío Paloma needed no assistance to carry the business forward: he had never worked with such enthusiasm as he had displayed on finding himself the owner of La Sequiòta; but—what the devil!—an agreement was an agreement, and it seemed to Cañamèl that the youth was robbing him of something when he beheld Tonet so content with life and so utterly detached from his business.

What luck the lubber had! Fear of losing La Sequiòta was the only thing that restrained Tío Paco. In the meantime Tonet, living in the tavern as if it were his own, fattened in the delight of having all his desires satisfied for the mere trouble of stretching out his hand to receive what he wished. He ate of the best in the house, filled his glass at every cask, both large and small, and sometimes, with a mad, sudden impulse, as if the more plainly to affirm his possession, he took the liberty of caressing Neleta behind the counter, in the presence of Cañamèl and only some four feet away from the customers, among whom were some who kept a close eye on the tavern-keeper's wife and her companion.

At times he felt a wild desire to leave Palmar, to spend a day away from the Albufera, in the city or in the lake towns, and he would plant himself before Neleta with the expression of a master.

"*Dónam un duro.* Give me a *duro.*"

"A *duro!* And what for?" The woman's green eyes,

proud and imperious, would be riveted upon his: she would draw herself up with the arrogance of the adulteress who does not wish to be deceived in turn; but on noting in the youth's glance only his wish to wander about for a while, to shake himself free of his pampered existence, Neleta smiled contentedly and gave him as much money as he asked, urging him to return soon.

Cañamèl grew indignant. All this might be tolerated if he only attended to business; but no; his interests were being jeopardized, and to make matters worse, the youth was eating up half the tavern, asking money on top of it all! His wife was too kind; that gratitude which she professed toward the Palomas for their kindness to her in her childhood, was ruining her. And with his miser's insistence upon detail he would reckon up just what Tonet ate in his establishment, and the prodigality with which he invited his friends to drink, always at the proprietor's expense. Even Sangonera, the lousy tramp that had been thrown out of the place because he soiled the seats, had now returned under the Cubano's protection, and Tonet would make him guzzle till he got dead drunk, using for this purpose the bottled liquors,—the costliest of the stock,—all for the pleasure of listening to the drivel and nonsense that the vagabond had got into his head as a result of his sacred readings.

"On some fine day he'll take possession even of my bed," said the tavern-keeper once, complaining to his Neleta. And the unhappy man could not read those inscrutable eyes; he could not see a diabolical smile in the malicious glance with which she received such a supposition.

When Tonet would weary of loafing about the tavern for days at a time, seated beside Neleta, with the expres-

sion of a pet dog awaiting the moment propitious for caresses, he would take Cañamèl's musket and his setter and go off to the sedge islets. Tío Paco's musket was the best in Palmar: a rich man's weapon that Tonet looked upon as his very own, and which rarely missed fire. The dog was the famous Centalla, known in the entire lake country for his remarkable scent. Not a piece of game ever escaped him, however thick the reed grass grew. He would dive into the water like an otter, and bring the wounded bird up from the depths of aquatic plants.

Cañamèl asserted that there wasn't enough money in the world to buy that dog from him; but with deep sadness he noticed that his Centella showed a greater fondness for Tonet, who took him off to the hunt every day, than for his former master, who was swathed in kerchiefs and cloaks close to the fire. That rascal even had taken his dog away from him! . . . .

Tonet, filled with enthusiasm for Tío Paco's excellent hunting accoutrements, consumed the whole supply of cartridges kept in the tavern for hunters. Nobody in Palmar had ever hunted so much. In the narrow streams of water of the *matas* nearest to the town Tonet's shooting sounded continually, and Centella, warmed to the task, splashed about the reed grass. The Cubano felt a voluptuous pleasure in this exercise, which recalled to him his adventures as a guerrillero. He would lurk in ambush, awaiting the birds with the same wily savage's precautions that he had employed in hiding in the thickets on a man-hunt. Centella would bring to the boat the *fòches* and the *collvèrts,* their soft necks and their plumage stained with blood. Then would come the less common birds which Tonet so delighted to hunt: and he looked admiringly

upon the dead forms in the bottom of the boat: the cock of the canebrakes, with its turquoise blue plumage and its red beak; the *agró,* or imperial heron, with its greenish and purple hue and a panache of long, slender feathers on its head; the *oroval,* with its tawny body and its red crop; the *piuló* or Florentine drake, white and yellow; the *morell* or pelucón, with its black head tinged with gold, and the *singlòt,* a beautiful wading bird with a glorious green plumage.

At night he would strut into the tavern with a conqueror's air, throwing down his heap of game, a rainbow of feathers. There! Tío Paco had a fine collection to fill his pot with! He presented it to him free of charge: after all, the gun was Paco's.

And when, from time to time, he would shoot a flamingo, called *bragat* by the people of Albufera, with its long legs, its big neck, its white and pink plumage and a certain mysterious air, like that of the Egyptian ibis, Tonet would insist that Cañamèl should have it stuffed in Valencia, to keep in his bedroom; an elegant decoration, since the gentlemen from the city were so eager to get one.

The tavern-keeper received these gifts with grunts that revealed his very relative satisfaction. When would the fellow let his gun have a rest? Didn't he find the reed-grass lands cold? Since he was so strong, why did he not help his grandfather nights in the work at the *redolí?* But the rogue received the sickly proprietor's complaints laughingly, and would turn to the counter.

"Neleta, a glass. . . ."

He had certainly earned it, passing the whole day among the marshes, his hands frozen to the musket, all for the sake of bringing home that heap of game. And

yet they said he fled work! . . . . In an excess of joyous immodesty he caressed Neleta's cheeks above the counter, ignoring the presence of customers and exhibiting no fear of her husband. Were they not like brother and sister, and hadn't they played together when they were children? . . . .

Tío Tòni knew nothing about his son's doings, nor did he care to know. He got up before dawn and did not return until nightfall. In the solitude of the submerged fields he ate, with La Borda, some sardines and a piece of corn-cake. His struggle to create new land kept him in poverty, permitting him no better food than this. When, after night had fallen, they returned to the cabin, he would lay down upon his bed with aching bones, sinking into the torpor of exhaustion, but his thoughts would follow him in his sleep, and he would calculate, amidst the clouds of his dreams, how many boatloads of earth were needed for his fields, and the sum of money he would have to pay to his creditors before he could consider himself the owner of the rice fields that he had created with his own sweat, palm by palm. Tío Paloma spent most of the nights away from the cabin, fishing in La Sequiòta. Tonet did not eat with the family, and only in the small hours of the night, after Cañamèl's tavern had been closed, would he kick impatiently at the door, awakening poor La Borda, who was sleepy and all tired out, to open it for him.

Thus the time passed by, until the festival season came to Palmar.

On the eve of the fiesta of the Infant Jesus, during the afternoon, almost the entire town thronged the space between the canal bank and rear door of Cañamèl's tavern. The musicians from Catarroja were expected,—the chief

attraction of the festivities—and the people, who during the year heard no other instruments than the barber's guitar and Tonet's accordeon, quivered with anticipation at thoughts of the blaring brasses and the booming of the bass-drum between the rows of cabins. None felt the rigors of the weather. The women, in order to display their new clothes, had laid aside their woolen shawls and showed their bare arms, made bluish by the cold. The men wore new sashes and red or black caps which still revealed the creases of the shop. Taking advantage of their wives' conversations, they ran off to the tavern, where the breath of the drinkers and the smoke of the cigars formed a dense atmosphere that reeked of coarse wool and dirty sandals. They spoke at the top of their voices about the music from Catarroja, asserting that it was the best in the world. The fishermen from that place were a bad set, but it must be admitted that their musicians provided better music than even the King ever heard. The poor lake dwellers must have some good qualities. And noticing that the canal bank was crowded with people whose shouts announced the approaching musicians, all the customers rushed forth in a flock and the tavern was left empty.

Above the tops of the reeds could be seen the end of a large sail. As the barge bringing the musicians appeared around a bend of the canal the crowd burst forth into a roar, as if it had been inspired by the sight of the red trousers, and of the white plumes that floated above their great helmets.

The younger folk of the town, following the traditional custom, struggled to get possession of the bass-drum. The boys plunged into the waters of the icy canal, sinking

up to their waists with a daring that made the teeth of the watchers on the bank chatter.

The old women protested:

*"Condenats! . . . . Pillaréu una pulmonia!* You'll catch your death of cold!"

But the boys kept rushing on to the boat, clambered up over the gunwale, amid the laughter of the musicians, fighting for the enormous instrument. "Give it to me! To me! . . . ." Until one of the boldest, tired of asking, seized it with such a grasp that the big drum almost fell into the water, and placing it upon his shoulder, he waded out of the canal, followed by his envious companions.

The musicians, after disembarking, formed in front of Cañamèl's house. They took their instruments out of their cases, tuned them, while the dense crowd followed their every movement with a certain silent veneration, enjoying with deep admiration this event that was waited for the whole year round.

As they burst into a noisy march, the audience was seized with astonishment and the strangest of feelings. Their ears, accustomed to the deep silence of the lake, were fairly pained by the roar of the instruments, which made the walls of the mud houses tremble. But after recovering from this first shock that disturbed the conventual calm of the town, the people began to smile gently, titillated by the music, which came to them like a voice from a remote world, like the majesty of a mysterious life that was lived far beyond the waters of the Albufera.

The women were deeply touched, without knowing why, and felt like crying; the men, straightening out their bent, boatmen's shoulders, marched with martial step be-

hind the band and the girls smiled at their sweethearts with gleaming eyes and flushed cheeks.

The music blew like a breath of new life over that slumbering crowd, rousing it from the lethargy of the still waters. They shouted without knowing why, they roared vivas to the Infant Jesus, they ran in clamorous groups ahead of the musicians, and even the older folks became as lively and playful as the little ones, who with their swords and their cardboard horses formed the escort of the drum-major, admiring all his gold braid.

Several times the band paraded up and down the only street of Palmar, prolonging the procession so that the public should feel satisfied, marching into the lanes between the cabins and issuing to the canal bank, only to retrace their steps up the street. The entire public followed these evolutions, singing at the top of their voices the liveliest passages of the march.

But this musical delirium had to end sometime, and the band paused in the square, before the church. The chief magistrate proceeded to the billeting of the bandsmen. The women disputed the honors according to the importance of the instruments, and the bass-drummer, preceded by his huge drum, walked off to the best house in the place. The musicians, content with having displayed their uniforms, huddled into cloaks, cursing the damp cold of Palmar.

The dispersion of the band did not clear the square of people. In one corner there suddenly rose the rolling of a tabor, followed shortly by a flageolet whining prolonged scales that seemed like musical capers. The crowd applauded. It was *Dimòni,* the famous flageolet-player of

every year; a happy-go-lucky old tramp as renowned for his drunkenness as for his skill upon the flageolet. Sangonera was his best friend, and whenever the flageolet-player came to the fiesta, Sangonera would not leave his side for a moment, knowing that at the end they would drink up fraternally the money of the celebration committee.

The largest eel of the year was going to be raffled off and the proceeds were going to help pay the expenses of the celebration. This was an ancient custom, respected by all the fishermen. The one who caught a huge eel would keep it in his pond, and dared not sell it. If anybody caught a larger one, the larger one was put aside, and the owner of the previous eel could sell his. In this way the committeemen always had the largest fish that had been caught during the year in the lake of Albufera.

This year the honor of the largest eel fell to Tío Paloma; not in vain did he fish in the best place. The old fellow experienced one of the greatest satisfactions of his career when he showed the beautiful creature to the multitude on the square. *He* had caught that fellow! . . . . And in his trembling arms he held the long serpentine figure with the green back and the white belly; it was as thick as a person's thigh and had a skin so slimy that the light was reflected in it. The appetizing creature was to be carried around the whole town to the tunes of the flageolet, while the foremost personages of the Society sold the raffle numbers from door to door.

"Here, work for a change," said the boatman, placing the eel into Sangonera's arms.

The vagabond, proud of the confidence reposed in him, led the march with the eel in his arms, followed by the

flageolet and the tabor and surrounded by the jumping, shouting gamins. The women ran to get a close view of the huge fish, to touch it with religious admiration, as if it were a mysterious divinity of the lake, and Sangonera repelled them gravely. *"Fòra, fòra!* . . . . Get away! Keep away!" They would spoil it with all that handling!

But when they had reached Cañamèl's tavern, he decided that he had enjoyed popular admiration long enough. His arms hurt, softened by indolent life; he made up his mind that the eel was not for him, and handing it over to the urchins about him, entered the tavern, letting the raffle continue without him, as they carried off the beautiful creature at the head of the procession, like a trophy of victory.

There were very few customers in the tavern. Behind the counter was Neleta, with her husband and the Cubano, discussing the celebration of the following day. The entertainment committee was, according to custom, composed of those who had won the best sites in the annual drawing of *redolíns,* and the chief positions went to Tonet and his partner. They had gone to the city and had black suits made, in which to listen to mass from the first pew, and they were engrossed in going over the preparations of the festivities.

On the following day there arrived on the mail-boat the musicians and choristers and a priest celebrated for his eloquence, who would preach a sermon on the Infant Jesus, incidentally lauding the simplicity and the virtues of the fishermen of Albufera.

A barge was moored off the beach of the Dehesa, taking on a cargo of myrtle with which to cover the square; and in a corner of the tavern the fire-works maker had

several baskets full of *masclets,*—little iron petards that went off like cannon.

On the next morning the lake quivered with the discharge of the *masclets,* as if a battle were being fought in Palmar. Then the canal was thronged with people, who ate their breakfasts between slices of bread. They were waiting for the musicians who were coming from Valencia, and there was much comment on the liberality of the persons in charge. Tío Paloma's grandson certainly knew how to do things! No wonder,—with all of Cañamèl's money within reach!

The mail-boat arrived, and the first to land was the preacher,—a stout priest with imposing forehead, carrying a large bag of red damask, which contained his vestments. Sangonera, out of old habit acquired during his service as sacristan, hastened to take charge of the luggage, throwing it over his shoulder. Then followed the members of the choir, who jumped to the ground from the boat: the choristers with their gluttonous faces and their curly hair, the musicians carrying their violins and flutes wrapped in green cloth under their arms, and the solo singers, yellowish youths with sunken eyes and expressions of precocious malice. They were all speaking of the famous *all y pebre* made in Palmar, as if they had made the trip for the sole purpose of eating.

The crowd let them enter the town without stirring from the bank. They wished to see at close range those mysterious instruments that were deposited near the mast, and which some porters were beginning to carry away. The kettle-drums, as they were brought ashore, caused astonishment, and there arose a general discussion as to

the purpose served by these huge pots, which looked so much like the ones they used for cooking fish. The bass-viols were greeted with an ovation, and the people ran to the church, following the men who were carrying these "giant guitars."

Mass began at ten. The square and the church were perfumed by sweet-smelling shrubs from the Dehesa. The mud had disappeared under a thick layer of leaves. The church was filled with blossoms and wax candles, and from the door it looked like a dark sky dotted with infinite stars.

Tonet had prepared everything in the best of style, seeing even to the music that would be sung at the celebration. None of your celebrated masses that put people to sleep. That was all very well for the city people, who were used to operas. In Palmar they wanted the mass by Mercadante, as in all the Valencian towns.

During the celebration the women were deeply touched by the voices of the tenors who sang Neapolitan barcarolles in honor of the Infant Jesus, while the men's heads swayed to the rhythm of the orchestra, which was as voluptuous as that of a waltz. This livened their spirits; as Neleta said, it was far better than a theatrical performance, and it inspired the soul. And in the meantime, outside on the square the long rows of *masclets* were being shot off, frequently drowning out the songs of the artists and the words of the preacher.

When it was over, the crowd loitered in the square until dinner time. The band at one end of the plaza, somewhat forgotten after the splendors of the mass, started up a tune. The people felt content amid that environment

of sweet-smelling greenery and the smoke of powder, and thought of the pot waiting for them at home with the best birds of Albufera.

The wretchedness of their previous life seemed now to belong to some distant world to which they would never return.

All Palmar believed that it had entered forever into happiness and abundance, and they discussed the grandiloquent phrases that the preacher had dedicated to the fisherfolk; the half-ounce that they gave him for the sermon, and the basket of money that the musicians surely must cost, the powder, the gold-fringed curtains stained with wax that adorned the portal of the church, and the band that deafened them with its martial blasts.

The groups congratulated the Cubano, who stood stiffly in his black suit, and Tío Paloma, who that day considered himself the owner of Palmar. Neleta strutted about among the women, with her costly mantilla coming down to her eyes, displaying the mother-of-pearl rosary and ivory-bound prayer-book that she had received at her wedding. Nobody gave a thought to Cañamèl, despite his pompous appearance and the thick gold chain that weighed against his paunch. It seemed that it was not his money that was paying the cost of the festivities: all the congratulations went to Tonet, as proprietor of La Sequiòta. As for these people, anyone who did not belong to the Society of Fishermen was unworthy of notice. And the tavern-keeper could feel growing within him his hatred for the Cubano, who little by little was assuming possession of all he owned.

This ill humor was with him all day long. His wife, guessing how he felt, forced herself to appear amiable

during the banquet which they gave in the upper story, to the preacher and the musicians. She spoke of poor Paco's illness, which put him into a devilish mood at times, and begged all to pardon him his ugliness. In the middle of the afternoon, after the mail-boat had taken the visitors off to Valencia, the irritated Cañamèl, alone at last with his wife, poured out all his bile.

He would not endure this Cubano any longer. He could get along easily with the grandfather, for that fellow was an industrious worker, and he kept his word; but this Tonet was a lazy good-for-nothing who scoffed at his partner, living the life of a prince on his money, and merely because he had drawn a lucky number in the Society drawing. He even deprived his partner of the little satisfaction that he might derive from spending so much money on the festivities. They all expressed their thanks to the other fellow; as if Cañamèl were nobody, as if all the money for the exploitation of the *redolí* didn't come out of his pocket, and all the results of the fishing weren't due to him. The end would be that he'd throw that tramp out of the house, even if it meant the loss of the business.

Frightened by the threat Neleta intervened. She counselled calm; he must remember that it was he who had sought out Tonet. Besides, she regarded the Palomas as part of the family: they had protected her in her wretched days.

But Cañamèl, with childish obstinacy, repeated his threats. As for Tío Paloma, well and good: he would go any distance with him. But either Tonet mended his ways, or he would break with him. Everyone in his place: he didn't care to share his profits any longer with that

idler who knew only how to exploit him and his poor grandfather. It cost him plenty to make money, and he would stand for no abuse.

The discussion between man and wife became so heated that Neleta wept, and that night she would not go to the square, where the dance was regularly held.

Large wax candles that were used in church for burials illuminated the square. *Dimòni* played on his flageolet all the ancient Valencian contra-dances, the *cháquera vella,* or the dance in the style of Torrente, and the girls of Palmar danced ceremoniously, hand in hand, changing couples, as if they were courtly ladies who had disguised themselves as fisherwomen to dance a *pavana* in the torch-light. Then came the *ú y el dos,* a more spirited dance, enlivened by verses, and the pairs hopped about briskly, while a tempest of shouts and cat-calls would arise whenever some girl, whirling around like a top, showed her stockings beneath the flowing wheel of her skirts.

Before midnight the cold broke up the festivities. The families went off to their cabins, but the younger element remained in the square,—the merry and gallant people of the town, who spent the three days of the celebration in continuous drunkenness. They carried their guns on their shoulders, as if in order to amuse themselves in a small town they needed to have their weapons at hand.

The *albaes* were organized. They were to spend the night, according to the traditional custom, in going from door to door, singing in honor of all the young and old women of Palmar, and to warm themselves for this task the singers carried along a wine-skin of wine and several bottles of brandy. Some of the musicians from Catarroja, a good-natured set, agreed to accompany Dimòni's

flageolet with their brass instruments, and the serenade of *les albaes* began its rounds on the dark, cold night, lighted by one of the torches from the dance.

All of Palmar's young men, with their antique weapons on their shoulders, marched in a compact group behind the flageolet-player and the musicians, who held their instruments by their cloaks, fearing the cold contact of the metal. Sangonera brought up the rear, carrying the wine-skin. Frequently he thought that the moment had come to place his burden upon the ground and he would prepare his glass for a nip.

One of the choristers would begin a stanza, singing the first couplet to the rhythmic beating of the little drum, and another would reply, completing the quatrain. Generally the two final lines were the most malicious and while the flageolet and the brasses greeted the end of the stanza with a roisterous refrain, the young men would explode into shouts and shrill neighings and fill the air with shots from their guns.

Much sleep there was in Palmar that night! The women, from their beds, followed mentally the procession of the serenaders, trembling at the noise and the shooting, and guessing the progress from door to door by the scandalous allusions with which each neighbor was greeted.

On this expedition Sangonera's wine-skin was not left undisturbed for long. The glasses circulated freely from group to group, giving them warmth in that freezing night, and their eyes sparkled brighter and brighter as their voices grew every moment more hoarse.

On one corner two youths had come to blows over the question of precedence in the matter of drinking, and

after exchanging a few blows they withdrew a few paces, aiming their guns at each other. Their companions all intervened and took their weapons away forcibly. Off to sleep! The wine had done them harm: they must go to bed! And the party of serenaders continued on their way with their songs and their cat-calls. Such incidents were part of the fun; they happened every year.

After three hours of slow trudging about the town they were all dead drunk. Dimòni, unable to hold his head up and with his eyes shut, seemed to sneeze into the flageolet, and the instrument whined as indecisively and as hesitantly as the legs of the player. Sangonera, seeing that the wine-skin was almost empty, was moved to song, and accompanied by an unending chorus of *"Fòra, fòra!"* amid whistles and cat-calls, he improvised incoherent verses against the "rich people" of the town.

There was no wine left, but they all counted on reaching Cañamèl's house by the middle of their rounds, and here they would replenish their supply.

Near the dark, closed tavern the wandering serenaders found Tonet wrapped up to his eyes in his cloak, with the mouth of his fowling-piece showing from underneath. The Cubano feared the indiscretion of these fellows; he recalled what he had heard on similar nights, and he believed that his presence would restrain them.

The crew, dazed by drunkenness and fatigue, seemed to be filled with new life before Cañamèl's house, as if from behind the grating of the door all could smell the perfume of the casks.

One of them sang a respectful song to *siñor don Paco,* flattering him to make him open the place, calling him the "flower of friends," and promising the good-will of all if

he would fill their wine-skin. But the house remained silent; not a window stirred; not the slightest sound came from inside.

In the second stanza they began to address poor Cañamèl in most familiar fashion, and the voice of the singers quivered with a certain irritation, which held promise of a torrent of insolence.

Tonet became nervous.

*"Che! . . . . No feu el pòr!* See there! . . . . Don't get nasty!" he said to his friends in a paternal manner.

But a fine condition these fellows were in for listening to advice! The third stanza was dedicated to Neleta, "the most charming woman in Palmar," pitying her for being married to the miser Cañamèl, "who was good for nothing. . . ." After this stanza the serenade degenerated into a venomous downpour of scandalous allusions. The crowd was having a wonderful time. They found the verses more to their taste than the wine, and they laughed with the malevolent delight that rustics take in ridiculing matrimonial troubles. They would all be seized with fury and unite in common cause if a fishermen were robbed of a *mornell* that was worth a few *reales,* yet they laughed like madmen when anyone was robbed of a wife.

Tonet trembled with anxiety and anger. At certain moments he wished to flee, foreseeing that his friends would go too far, but he was held back by pride, and the false hope that his presence would act as a check.

*"Che! Mireu lo que feu!* Hey there! Look out what you're doing!" he growled in tones of veiled threat.

But the singers considered themselves the huskiest fellows of the town; they were the bullies that had grown up while he was wandering about the lands across the sea.

They were eager to show him that the Cubano inspired them with no fear whatsoever, and they laughed at his warnings, improvising verses on the spot, which they cast like projectiles against the tavern walls.

One stripling, the nephew of La Samaruca, roused Tonet's anger to such a pitch that he lost control of himself. He sang a stanza upon the partnership of Cañamèl and the Cubano, saying that not only did they exploit La Sequiòta together, but Neleta likewise, and he concluded with the remark that soon the tavern-keeper's wife would have the heir that she had asked of her husband in vain.

With a bound the Cubano leaped into the midst of the group, and by the light of the torch he was seen to raise the butt-end of his gun, striking the singer's face. As the latter came to and reached for his musket, Tonet jumped back, firing his carbine almost without aiming. . . . And then what a tumult arose! . . . . The bullet went astray, but Sangonera thought he heard it whistle close to his nose, and he threw himself down on the ground uttering horrifying yells.

"They've killed me! Murderer! . . . ."

The windows of the surrounding houses were noisily opened; white faces loomed forth, some of which thrust their gun-barrels across the sill.

Tonet was disarmed in an instant, and pushed by many hands against the wall. He twisted and turned like a madman, struggling to pull out the knife that he kept in his sash.

*"Solteume!* Let me go!" he shouted, foaming with rage. *"Solteume!* Let me go! I'll kill that scoundrel!"

The magistrate and his patrol, who, foreseeing some-

thing of this sort, had been following the serenaders at a short distance, now interfered. *Pare Miquèl,* with his skin cap and carbine, began to deal blows with the butt of it right and left, with the satisfaction he always derived from striking people with impunity, in full exercise of his authority.

The sergeant of the guard took Tonet off to the lad's cabin, threatening him with his Mauser, and La Samaruca's nephew was taken into a house to have his wound dressed.

Sangonera caused even more trouble. He continued to roll about in the dirt, howling that he had been killed. They gave him the last drops of wine from the wine-skin to revive him, and the vagabond, content with the remedy, swore that he was shot through and through and could not rise, until the vicar, seeing through his tricks, gave him two salutory kicks which brought him to his feet at once.

The magistrate ordered the serenaders to continue on their way. They had sung enough to Cañamèl. The functionary felt for the tavern-keeper that respect which in towns is always inspired by the man of wealth, and was desirous of sparing him further vulgarities.

The group withdrew dispiritedly: in vain did Dimòni's flageolet whine its capering scales; the singers, finding the wine-skin dry, felt obstructions in their throats.

The windows closed, the street remained deserted, but the last of the curious watchers thought that they heard, on the top story of the tavern, the sound of voices, the scraping of furniture, and feebly the weeping of a woman interrupted by the muffled exclamations of a furious voice.

The next day the only topic of discussion in Palmar

was the brawl that had taken place before Cañamèl's house.

Tonet did not dare to appear in the tavern. He feared to face the painful situation in which he had been placed by the imprudence of his friends. During the morning he wandered about the square, seeing from afar the tavern-door thronged with people. It was the final day of the spree and the town holiday. They were to celebrate the feast of Christ, and in the afternoon the musicians would sail for Catarroja, leaving Palmar sunk in its conventual tranquillity for all of the next year.

Tonet ate with his father and La Borda, who, during the three days of the festivities, in order to avoid the gossip of the neighbors, had unwillingly suspended their hard struggle against the waters. Tío Tòno was probably ignorant of what had happened the previous night. His grave look, which was nevertheless the same as usual, seemed to indicate this. Besides, he had spent the holidays repairing the damage that winter had done to his cabin, for the hard toiler could not be at rest for a moment.

La Borda, however, must know something about the fray: it could be read in her pure eyes, which seemed to illuminate her ugliness; in the compassionate, tender glance she fixed upon Tonet, shuddering at thought of the danger he had been in the night before. During one of the moments in which they were left alone she complained bitterly. Lord! If his father only knew what had happened! . . . . It would kill the poor old man! . . . .

Tío Paloma did not appear at the cabin: doubtless he ate with Cañamèl. In the afternoon he encountered Tonet on the square. His wrinkled countenance reflected no

impression, but he spoke to his grandson dryly, advising him to go to the tavern. Tío Paco had something to say to him.

Tonet delayed the visit a while. He passed the time in the square watching the band form to play for the last time what they called the *pasacalle de las anguilas,*— the eel's march. The musicians considered themselves slighted if, on returning from Palmar, they brought no fish to their families. Every year, before they left, they marched around the town, playing the final march, while before the bass-drum ran some urchins with baskets in their hands, gathering whatever each neighbor cared to donate: eels, tenches and other fish, not counting the *llobaro* (the much-sought lubina) which the celebration committee reserved for the bandmaster.

The music began to play, while the musicians walked along leisurely, so that the fisherfolk might contribute their offerings. It was then that Tonet decided to enter Cañamèl's house.

"Hello, everybody!" he shouted merrily, to give himself courage.

Neleta, behind the counter, cast an indefinable glance in his direction, and lowered her head so that she should not catch sight of her deeply sunken eyes and the eyelids that were red from weeping.

Cañamèl answered him from the rear of the establishment, pointing majestically to the door that led to the interior.

"Come in, come in; we've got something to talk over."

The two men entered a room adjoining the kitchen; this *estudi* sometimes served as a bedchamber for the hunters that came from Valencia.

Cañamèl allowed his partner no time to be seated. He was livid; his eyes glittered, sunken more than ever in puffs of fat, and his short, round nose trembled with a nervous tic. Tío Paco came straight to the point. *That* would have to come to an end: they could not continue in partnership nor be friends any longer. And as Tonet tried to protest, the obese tavern-keeper, who was stimulated by a passing moment of energy, perhaps the last in his life, stopped him with a gesture. No more talk: it was useless. He was determined to cut off all relations; even Tío Paloma agreed that he was right. They had gone into this business with the understanding that he was to furnish the money and the Cubano the work. His money had not been lacking: what nobody saw was his partner's effort. The *señor* was going around living a high old life, while his poor grandfather was killing himself, working away for him! . . . . And if that were only all! He had come into this house as if it belonged to him. He seemed to be the owner of the tavern. He ate and drank of the best; he was as free with the money-box as if it had no proprietor; he permitted himself liberties that had better not be recalled; he had taken away his dog, his gun, and, according to what the people were saying now . . . . even his wife.

"That's a lie! . . . . A lie!" shouted Tonet with the anxiety of the guilty.

Cañamèl looked at him in such a way that he guarded himself, with a certain fear.

Yes; surely it was a lie. He, too, was convinced of that. Luckily for Neleta and Tonet, for if he should ever suspect even remotely that there was any truth to the vile things the rabble had sung on the previous night, he was

the man to wring her neck for her, and send a bullet between her lover's eyebrows. What did he think? Tío Paco was a very kind fellow, but despite his illness, he was as much a man as any other when his property was assailed.

And the tavern-keeper, quivering with restrained fury, paced back and forth like the old, broken horse of strong breed, who can rise on his haunches to the last moment. Tonet looked admiringly at the old adventurer, who, in his sickly indolence, heavy-paunched and panting as he was, could still summon the energy of his warrior days, when he had been free of all scruple.

Amid the silence of the room sounded the distant echo of the brass band that was making the rounds of the town.

Cañamèl spoke anew, and his voice was accompanied by the music, which was now coming gradually nearer.

Yes; it was all a lie. But he wasn't there to furnish a butt for the people's laughter. Moreover, he didn't care to see Tonet forever in the tavern, taking those brotherly liberties with Neleta. He would stand no longer for this fictitious fraternal affection in his house. It was all over. He agreed with Tío Paloma. Henceforth the two of them would continue to work La Sequiòta alone, and the grandfather would arrange with the grandson about the relative shares. Tonet had no more business with Cañamèl. If he had anything to say against this, let him speak. He was the owner of La Sequiòta because he had drawn it, but Tío Paco would withdraw his nets and his capital, Tonet would disgust his grandfather, and then, we'd see how he managed it alone!

Tonet did not protest; neither did he resist. Whatever his grandfather agreed to was best.

The music had by now reached the front of the tavern. The players halted, and their harmonious blasts made the walls tremble.

Cañamèl raised his voice to be heard. Now that the matter of the partnership was settled, they must speak as man to man. And he, with his authority as a husband who was not going to be laughed at and as a man who could throw out a troublesome customer, ordered Tonet never to come near the tavern again. Did he understand? Their friendship was at an end! That was the best way to stop gossip and lies. . . . Henceforth the door of that house must be for the Cubano as high . . . as high as the Miguelete in Valencia.

And while the trombones blared deafeningly before the door of the house, Cañamèl drew his almost spherical figure erect and raised his arm roofward, to express the dizzy, immeasurable height that must thenceforward separate the Cubano from the tavern-keeper and his wife.

## VII

AFTER spending two days away from the tavern, Tonet realized how much he loved Neleta.

Perhaps his despair was influenced by the loss of the merry comfort he had formerly enjoyed,—of that abundance into which he had sunk as into a wave of happiness. In addition to this, he missed the fascination of the secret love that had been guessed by the whole town; the morbid joy of caressing his beloved in the face of danger, almost in the presence of the husband and the customers, exposed to momentary detection.

Forbidden to enter Cañamèl's house, he did not know where to go. He tried to make friends in the other taverns of Palmar,—wretched hovels, with a tiny cask as their entire stock, where only now and then there would come in those whose long-standing debts restrained them from patronizing Cañamèl. Tonet fled these places like some potentate who by mistake had blundered into a cheap dramshop.

He spent days wandering about the outskirts of the town. When he would weary of this, he would go to Saler, to Perelló, to the harbor of Catarroja, anywhere at all, just to kill time. He, who was naturally so lazy, would spend hours poling his boat around, just to see a friend and merely smoke a cigar with him.

The situation compelled him to live in his father's cabin, and he would scrutinize Tío Tòni with a certain

disquietude, for the man, by the fixity of his glance, seemed to reveal his acquaintance with what had happened. Tonet, because of the heaviness with which time hung on his hands, changed his way of living. Rather than wander from one side of the lake to the other, like a caged animal, he would help out his poor father. And from that day on, with the transient fever of activity which characterizes the indolent when they decide to work, he went, as of old, to help dredge up mud from the channels.

Tío Tòni revealed his gratitude for this return of the prodigal, unwrinkling his brow and speaking a few words to his son.

He knew everything. Things had come about just as he had predicted. Tonet had not acted like a Paloma, and the father had suffered a great deal when he had heard the story. It wounded him deeply to see his son living at the expense of the tavern-keeper and in addition, robbing him of his wife.

"It's a lie! . . . A lie!" replied the Cubano with the anxiety of the guilty. "It's all vile slander! . . ."

All the better, then: Tío Tòni was happy that such was the case. The chief point was that he had avoided the danger. Now to work, to be an honest man, to help his father in the task of filling in those pools. When these should be converted into fields and the people of Palmar should see the Palomas gathering many sacks of rice from them, then Tonet would find a mate. He could choose from among all the maidens of the surrounding towns. Nobody says No to a rich man.

And Tonet, enthused by his father's words, gave himself up to the work with a veritable frenzy. Poor La

Borda worked harder with him than even with Tío Tòni. She could not seem to work hard enough to satisfy him; he was exacting and brutal with the unhappy girl; he loaded her as if she were a beast, but he set himself as criterion for fatigue. Poor La Borda, gasping under the weight of the basketful of earth and the continuous poling, would smile to him happily, and at night, when, with aching bones she prepared the supper, she would glance gratefully at Tonet, that prodigal son who had caused his father so much suffering, but who now, with his good conduct, had brought to the countenance of the powerful toiler an air of serenity and confidence.

But the wind of the Cubano's will never blew long in the same direction. He was stirred by furious squalls of activity, and then the doldrums of an absolute, dominating indolence would get the best of him again.

After a month of this unremitting toil Tonet grew weary, as before. A large part of the fields was already covered, but there remained deep holes, which filled him with despair; they were bottomless pits, it seemed, through which the routed waters ever kept returning, slowly wearing away the land that had been accumulated at the cost of so much effort. The Cubano was afraid and discouraged before the magnitude of the undertaking. Accustomed to the bounty of Cañamèl's house, he rebelled all the more at the thought of the coarse dishes cooked by La Borda, the scant, insipid wine, the hard corn-cake and the musty sardines, his father's only food.

His grandfather's serenity made him indignant. He continued to visit Cañamèl's house as if nothing had happened. There he ate and drank, in perfect accord with the tavern-keeper, who seemed satisfied with the old man's

industrious exploitation of La Sequiòta. As for the grandson, let a thunderbolt strike him! He didn't speak a word to him when he saw him at night in the cabin, as if he didn't exist,—as if he were not the real owner of La Sequiòta! . . .

His grandfather and Cañamèl had conspired to cheat him out of his just dues, but they would find they had to do with the wrong party. Perhaps all this indignation of the tavern-keeper had had no other purpose than to get him out of the way, so that the profit of the two others should be greater. And with that rural greed which is so fierce and pitiless that it recognizes neither affections nor family ties in matters of money, Tonet one night accosted Tío Paloma just as the grandfather was about to set out for the *redolí*. He was the owner of La Sequiòta,—the real owner, and he hadn't seen a *céntimo* for a long time. He knew, of course, that fishing was not as splendid as in other years, but they were doing a good business just the same, and grandfather and Tío Paco must be storing away a goodly number of *duros* in their sashes. He knew that from the eel dealers. Let's see, then! . . . He asked for plain figures: let them give him what was coming to him, or else he would take back the *redolí* and go looking for less rapacious partners.

Tío Paloma, with the despotic authority which he still imagined he had the right to wield over the whole family, at first thought that he would split his grandson's head open with the tip of an oar. But then he recalled the negroes that the Cubano had slain yonder across the seas, and—*recordóns!*—you can't strike that sort of fellow, even if he does belong to the family. Besides, the threat of taking back the *redolí* frightened him.

Tío Paloma took refuge in morality. If he gave his grandson no money, it was because he knew the boy's character, and money, in the hands of young men, is perdition itself. He would drink it all down, he would go off to gamble with the card-sharks in the gloom of some hut in Saler; wherefore he preferred to save it up, and thus did Tonet a favor. After all, when he died, to whom would all his belongings go if not to his grandson? . . .

But Tonet was not softened by hopes. He wanted what belonged to him, or else he would take back the *redolí*. And after hot haggling, which lasted more than three days, the boatman decided one afternoon to dig into his sash, extracting with a painful expression a roll of *duros*. The boy could have them. . . . Jew! . . . Good-for-nothing! . . . After he had squandered it all in a few days, let him come back for more. He need have no scruples. Let his grandfather go to blazes! He could clearly see what sort of future awaited him in his old age. He would have to work like a slave, in order that his master might live like a lord. . . . And he left Tonet, as if he had forever lost that little affection for his grandson which he yet had even retained.

The Cubano, now supplied with money, did not return to his father's cabin. He wished to spend his idleness in hunting, leading the life of a warrior, getting his food by powder, and he began by purchasing a musket somewhat larger than the venerable arms that were kept in his house. Sangonera, who had been thrown out of Cañamèl's place on the day following Tonet's expulsion, tagged about with the latter, seeing him idle and disgusted with the laborious life he led in his father's cabin.

The Cubano took up with the vagabond. He was a

good comrade, from whom a certain benefit might be derived. He had a place to live, which, although it was worse than a kennel, still would do for refuge.

Tonet would be the hunter and Sangonera the dog. Everything would be divided equally between them: food and wine. Was the vagabond agreeable? Sangonera was happy to consent. He, too, would contribute to their common maintenance. He had a pair of golden hands when it came to pulling the *mornells* up out of the canals, taking out the fish and returning the nets to the water. He wasn't like certain unscrupulous thieves who, as the fishermen of Palmar said, robbed not only the soul, but carried off the body as well,—which is to say, the mesh sacks. Tonet would hunt game and he would provide fish. Agreed.

Ever since then, Tío Paloma's grandson would only rarely be seen in town, with his gun across his shoulder, whistling comically to Sangonera, who walked behind him with bowed head, glancing furtively on all sides to see whether there was anything within reach of his claws worth taking.

They spent several weeks in the Dehesa, leading the life of primitive beings. Tonet, amid his tranquil existence in Palmar, had often missed his warrior life across the ocean,—a life lived in boundless liberty and filled with the dangers of the *guerrillero,* who, with death ever staring him in the face, sees neither obstacle nor barrier, and gun in hand, satisfies his desires, recognizing only the law of necessity.

The habits contracted during his years of martial experience in the thick forests now reawakened in the Dehesa, only a step from towns where law and authority

dwelt; with dry wood he and his companion would fashion a hut in any corner of the forest. Whenever they were hungry they would kill a rabbit or some of the wild pigeons that fluttered among the pines; and if they needed money for wine and cartridges, Tonet would shoulder his gun, and in one morning would gather a fine bag of game, which the vagabond would sell in Saler or in the harbor of Catarroja, returning with a wine-skin, which he would hide in the bushes.

Tonet's gun rang out insolently all over the Dehesa, and was a note of defiance to the guards, who had to abandon their quiet lives of recluses.

Sangonera was on the watch like a dog while Tonet hunted, and when with his acute vagabond's eyesight he would see the enemy approach, he would whistle to his friend to get into hiding. Several times the grandson of Tío Paloma had found himself face to face with his persecutors, but he adroitly upheld his determination to live in the Dehesa. One day a guard fired at him; but a few moments later, as a threatening reply, he heard the hiss of a bullet close to his head. It was no use telling the former guerrillero anything. He was a scoundrel who feared neither God nor the devil. He was as good a shot as his grandfather, and if he sent a bullet so close, it was merely in the nature of a warning. If he were to be got rid of, they would have to kill him. The guards, who had large families in their huts, at last silently allowed the insolent huntsman to have his way, and whenever the discharge of his gun rang out, they pretended not to hear very well, and always ran in the opposite direction.

Sangonera, cuffed and dismissed everywhere he went, felt strong and proud under Tonet's protection, and when

he entered Saler he would look insolently at everybody, like a barking dog that counts on his master's defense. In exchange for this protection he gave his services as a scout, and if from time to time a pair of civil guards would approach from the suburb of Ruzafa, Sangonera would guess their coming before seeing them, as if he could scent the fellows.

"The three-cornered hats!" he would say to his comrade. "They're here!"

The days on which yellow belts and polished three-cornered hats were seen in the vicinity of the Dehesa, Tonet and Sangonera would take refuge in the Albufera. Crouching in one of Tío Paloma's skiffs, they would go from thicket to thicket, shooting birds, which the vagabond would gather, often having to get up to his chin in the water, in mid-winter.

On stormy nights,—the dark and rainy ones that Tío Paloma waited for as for a blessing, since these were the times of the large catches, Tonet and Sangonera would spend the time in the latter's cabin, huddled into a corner, for the water poured down in torrents through the holes in the roof.

When Tonet was at his father's elbow, he avoided his sad, severe look. La Borda would steal in cautiously with a change of clothing for Tonet, and to lend those services that only a woman can. The poor girl, exhausted with the day's toil, would mend the men's rags by the light of a lantern, sitting near the two tramps, addressing not a word of reproof, daring only to glance now and then at her brother with a pained expression.

When the two boon companions passed the night alone,

they would talk, drinking endlessly, and utter their most intimate thoughts. Tonet, habituated by Sangonera's example to a continuous drunkenness, could not resist the burden of his secret, and he communicated to his companion the tale of his love affair with Neleta.

The vagabond at first tried to protest. That was bad. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." But as he went on, carried away by his gratitude to Tonet, he found excuses and justification for the fault, with the clumsy casuistry that he had picked up while serving as vicar's assistant. The truth was that they had a certain right to love each other. Had they become acquainted after Neleta's marriage, their relations would have been a gross sin. But they had known each other since childhood; they had been sweethearts, and it was all Cañamèl's fault, for having mixed in where nobody asked him, disturbing their relations. He well deserved what had come about. And recalling the many times that the flabby proprietor had thrown him out of the tavern, he laughed with deep satisfaction at his conjugal misfortune and considered himself avenged.

Then, when there was no wine left in the skin and the lantern began to grow dim, Sangonera's eyes would shut with drunkenness and he would discourse incoherently upon his beliefs.

Tonet, accustomed to this talk, would doze off and not hear a thing he said, while the straw roof of the cabin was shaken by the wind, and the rain filtered through.

Sangonera did not grow tired of talking. Why was he so unfortunate? Why did Tonet suffer ennui and melancholy because he could not see Neleta? . . . Because

everything in this world was injustice; because people, dominated by money, insisted upon living just opposite to the way that God ordains.

And drawing close to Tonet's ear, he would wake him, whispering in a mysterious voice about the forthcoming realization of his hopes. The good times were fast approaching. *He* was already upon earth. He had seen Him, just as plainly as he now saw Tonet, and He had touched him,—poor sinner that he was,—with His hand, which was of a divine coolness. And for the tenth time he related his mysterious encounter on the shore of Albufera. He was returning from Saler with a package of cartridges for Tonet, and on the road that borders the lake he had been overcome by a deep emotion, as if something were approaching him that paralyzed his energy. His legs bent beneath him and he fell to the ground, with a deep desire to sleep, to vanish completely and never awaken.

"You were drunk," said Tonet, when he reached this part.

But Sangonera protested. No; he was not drunk. That day he had drunk but little. The proof lay in the fact that he remained awake, even though his body refused to obey him.

The afternoon was drawing to a close: the Albufera had a purple color; afar, in the mountains, the sky was aflame with waves of blood, and against this background, coming along the road, Sangonera beheld a man who stopped as he reached his side.

The vagabond trembled at the recollection. His glance was gentle and sad, His beard parted, His hair long. How was He dressed? He could recall only a white covering,

something like a tunic or a very long smock, and on His back, as if He were groaning beneath its weight, a huge bulk that Sangonera had not been able to make out. Perhaps it was the instrument of a new torture with which mankind would be redeemed. . . . He had bent over him, and all the light of the dusk seemed to be concentrated in His eyes. He stretched out a hand and with His fingers touched Sangonera's forehead, with a cold touch, which made him shudder from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes. He murmured certain strange, melodious words that the vagabond could not understand, and went off smiling, while he, overcome by emotion, fell into a deep sleep, to awake hours later in the darkness of night.

He had never seen Him again, but it had been He, he was certain. He had returned to earth to save His work, which had been endangered by man: he was going once again in quest of the poor, of the simple, of the fishermen of the lakes. Sangonera must be one of the elect; not for nothing had He touched him with His hand. And the vagabond announced with all the fervor of faith his determination to abandon his companion as soon as the new, gentle apparition should present Himself once more.

But Tonet replied ill-humoredly, since his sleep had been disturbed, and threatened him in a thick, sullen voice. He had told him many a time that this had been nothing but a drunkard's dream. If he had been sober and *dry,* which was the condition in which he ought to do all his business, he would have seen that the mysterious man was a certain wandering Italian who had spent two days in Palmar sharpening knives and scissors, and who carried his grinding-machine on his back.

Sangonera grew silent, out of fear of his protector's hand, but his faith was scandalized, and he mutely rebelled against Tonet's vulgar explanations. . . . He would see Him again! He was positive that he would hear again that strange and soothing language, feel His cold hand upon his forehead and see again that tender smile. Only he was saddened by the possibility that the meeting would again take place during the late afternoon, when he had many times satisfied his thirst and his legs would be paralyzed.

Thus did the winter pass for the two idlers; Sangonera cherishing the most extravagant hopes; Tonet thinking of Neleta, whom he rarely saw, for the young man, in his rare trips to Palmar, stopped in the square before the church, not daring to approach Cañamèl's place.

This absence, prolonging itself for month after month, caused the remembrance of his former happiness to grow in his mind, until it assumed illusive proportions. Neleta's image filled his eyes. He could see her in the forest where they had been lost when they were children, in the lake where they had surrendered to each other, surrounded by the sweet mystery of night. He could not take a step in this circle of water and mud in which he lived his present life, without stumbling against something that summoned memory of her. Goaded by continuance and impassioned by the vigorousness of his vagrant life, Tonet spent many a night in agitated dreams, and Sangonera would hear him call to Neleta with the fervor of the lovesick male.

One day, Tonet, impelled by this passion that was driving him mad, felt the necessity of seeing her. Cañamèl, growing daily more infirm, had gone off to the city. The Cubano resolutely entered the tavern at noon, when all

the customers were at home and he might meet Neleta alone behind the counter.

The tavern-keeper's wife, beholding him in the doorway, uttered a piercing cry, as if a ghost had appeared. A flash of joy passed through her eyes; but at once they darkened, as if reason had returned to her, and she lowered her head with a harsh, intractible gesture.

"Be off! Be off!" she murmured. "Do you want to ruin me?"

He, wish to ruin her! . . . And this supposition cut him so deeply that he did not dare to protest. Instinctively he recoiled, and no sooner had he repented of his weakness than he was in the square, far from the tavern.

He did not try to return. Whenever his stifled passion suggested a visit to her, it was enough for him to recall that gesture and her look, whereupon immediately he would be overcome by a great coolness. Cañamèl, who formerly was the butt of their jests, had now become an insuperable obstacle.

The hatred that he felt for the husband sent him off in search of his grandfather, in the belief that whatever he did against the latter would react against Neleta's husband. Money! He wanted money! They were getting rich on La Sequiòta, and he, who was its owner, was entirely forgotten! These demands led to so many discussions and disagreements that it was a miracle they did not lead to blows on the canal banks. The old boatmen were astonished at the patience shown by Tío Paloma in trying to convince his grandson. It was a bad year; La Sequiòta was not yielding the results they had hoped for; besides, Cañamèl was sick and was intractable. Tío Paloma himself at certain moments wished that the year

would end and a new drawing take place, so that he could send to the devil a business that gave him so much trouble. His old system was the best: let each one fish on his own hook: as to partnerships, nothing doing! . . .

Whenever Tonet would succeed in extorting a few duros from his grandfather, he would whistle merrily to Sangonera, and from tavern to tavern they would make their way to Valencia, carousing several days in the wine-shops of the suburbs, until the lightness of their pockets compelled them to return to the Albufera.

From the conversations with his grandfather he had learned of Cañamèl's illness. This was the sole topic of discussion in Palmar, for the tavern-keeper was the first personage of the town, since all the folk, in their moments of need, solicited his favors. Cañamèl was getting worse; at first everybody had thought there was no cause for fear; his health was broken. But as they beheld him getting always heavier, more swollen, oozing fat, people gravely declared that he would die of excess of health and high living.

He complained more and more, without being able to localize his malady. The treacherous rheumatism, which was a product of that swampy soil, aided by a life of inactivity, was darting about his unwieldy body, playing at hide and seek, pursued by poultices and home remedies, which could never catch up with it in its mad career. In the morning the tavern-owner would complain of his head, and in the afternoon of his stomach or a swelling at the extremities. The nights were terrible, and more than once he had jumped out of bed in mid-winter, to open the window, saying that he was choking in the room, and that he could not get enough air to breathe. There

was a certain time when he believed that he had unmasked his malady. He had caught it! And he knew the huzzy's name! It was when he ate a great deal that he found the greatest difficulty in breathing and felt violent nausea. His illness resided in his stomach. And he commenced to doctor himself, recognizing that Tío Paloma was a learned fellow indeed. The trouble with him was an excess of good things, as the boatman had said. His illness was eating too much and drinking too well. Abundance was his enemy.

La Samaruca, his terrible sister-in-law, had drawn closer to him ever since he had thrown Tonet out of the tavern. At last, as she affirmed with harpy-like truculence, her brother-in-law had felt shame for once.

She would manage to meet Cañamèl when he went for a walk about town; she would call him out of the tavern—for she dared not enter the place in Neleta's presence, knowing that she would be unceremoniously thrown out—and during these chats she would inquire with exaggerated interest after her brother-in-law's health, deploring his follies. He should have remained single after he had lost "his dead wife." He had tried to play the young blade by marrying a young girl, and now he had all he was looking for: troubles and loss of health. That piece of imprudence was breaking out on him, and he ought to be thankful that it had not cost him his life altogether.

When Cañamèl spoke to her about his stomach trouble, the malicious woman stared at him in astonishment, as if she had been struck with a thought that terrified her. Was it really his stomach that was out of order? . . . . Hadn't they given him something to do away with him? And in the evil old witch's eyes the tavern-keeper read

such clear, odious suspicion against Neleta, that he grew furious, barely restraining himself from striking her. Off with you, old devil! His poor deceased wife had already told him; she had feared her sister more than the devil himself. And he turned his back upon La Samaruca, resolved never to talk to her again.

To suspect such horrible things of Neleta! . . . Never had his wife been so tender and solicitous as now. If any rancor remained in Tío Paco's soul from the time when Tonet had taken possession of the tavern with the tacit consent of his wife, it had all disappeared before Neleta's conduct; she forgot all the affairs of the establishment for the purpose of devoting all her thoughts to her husband.

She had no faith in the skill of that almost itinerant doctor,—a sad day-laborer of the profession who arrived twice per week at Palmar, prescribing quinine as his sole remedy, as if he knew no other treatment,—and combatting the growing indolence of her husband, she would dress him as if he were a little child, putting on every garment of his amid his complaints and protests of rheumatic pains, and she would take him to Valencia to have the reputable physicians examine him. She spoke for him, cautioning him like a mother to do everything that those gentlemen counselled.

The reply was always the same. All he suffered from was rheumatism, but it was a powerful rheumatism, which did not settle in any one spot, but which dominated his whole body, as a result of his wild, adventurous youth and the indolent, sedentary life he led now. He must take plenty of exercise, move about, and above all, avoid excesses. No drinking, for one could detect in him the

habits of a tavern-keeper who drinks with his customers. No other abuses, either. And the physicians lowered their voices, completing their recommendations with significant winks, for they did not dare to speak them plainly in the presence of a woman.

They would return to Albufera animated by a sudden energy, as a result of the physicians' words. He was ready to follow their advice to the letter: he would keep moving about, so that he could get rid of that fat which enwrapped his body and stifled his lungs; he would visit the baths they had recommended; he would obey Neleta, who knew more than he, and who astounded him with her pertness of speech in the presence of those grave gentlemen. But no sooner did he enter the tavern than his will would give way; he would feel himself overpowered by the voluptuousness of inertia, and would not venture to move an arm without complaints and supreme efforts. He would spend the days beside the fireplace, gazing into the flames, his thoughts astray, drinking down glass after the glass at the urgent invitation of his friends. One glass more wasn't going to kill him! And if Neleta glared at him severely, scolding him as if he were a child, the massive fellow would humbly excuse himself. He could not slight his customers; he must oblige them; business before health.

In this languishing condition, with his will dead and his body in the clutches of pain, his carnal instinct seemed to grow, becoming so sharp that it tormented him at all hours with pincers of flame. He experienced a certain relief in seeking out Neleta. She was a stimulant that stirred his being and after which his nerves seemed to calm down. She scolded him. He was killing himself!

He must recall the doctors' advice! But Tío Paco excused himself just as when he would drink an extra glass. One time more wasn't going to kill him. And she would yield resignedly, while her feline eyes gleamed with a spark of mysterious malignancy as if in the depths of her being she felt a strange delight in this invalid's love that was hastening the end of a life.

Cañamèl, a prey to his carnal instincts, would groan. It was his sole diversion, his constant thought amid the painful inactivity of rheumatism. At night he would stifle as he lay abed: he would have to wait for morning seated on his rope armchair near the window, breathing with the painful wheeze of the asthmatic. By day he would feel better, and when he wearied of toasting his feet before the fireplace, he would enter with wavering step into the inner rooms.

"Neleta! . . . . Neleta! . . . ." he would cry in an eager voice, in which his wife would divine an entreaty.

And Neleta would answer with a resigned mien, leaving the bar in charge of her aunt, remaining away for more than an hour, while the customers smiled, well aware of everything because of their intimacy with the tavern-proprietor and his wife.

Tío Paloma, who, with the approach of the end of the exploitation of the *redolí* showed less and less respect for his partner, said that Cañamèl and his wife chased after each other in the tavern just like dogs on the street.

La Samaruca declared that they were assassinating her brother-in-law. That hussy Neleta was a criminal, and her aunt a witch. Between the two they had given Tío Paco something that had turned his head: perhaps those "passion powders" that certain women made to conquer

men's indifference. And that was why the poor fellow followed her around so wildly, never able to sate his thirst, each day losing a new bit of health. And there was no justice upon earth to punish such a crime! . . .

Tío Paco's condition justified such talk. The customers saw him sit motionless beside the fireplace, even in midsummer, seeking the heat over which the *paellas* were boiling. The flies would flit about his face, and he would not show the least desire to frighten them away. On sunny days he would be wrapped in his cloak, groaning like a child, complaining of the cold caused by his pains. His lips were turning blue; his cheeks, flabby and full, were as yellow as wax, and his bulging eyes were surrounded by a black aureole, into which they seemed to sink. He was a huge, obese, quivering spectre, who cast a gloom over the customers by his presence. Tío Paloma, who had concluded the business of the *redolí* with Cañamèl, no longer patronized the tavern. He said that the wine tasted much worse when you had to look at that bundle of p[illegible] groans. As the old fellow had money, he frequented a little place whither his friends had followed him, and Cañamèl's custom suffered a great decline.

Neighbors advised her husband to go to the baths that the physicians had recommended. Her aunt would accompany him.

"A little later," the invalid would answer. "Later. . . . Later."

And he would continue to sit motionless in his matweed chair, unable to tear himself away from his wife and that corner, to which his very existence seemed chained.

His ankles began to swell, assuming monstrous dimen-

sions. Neleta had been expecting this. It was the swelling of the malleolus (that was it, she remembered the name well) which a doctor had predicted the last time she had gone to Valencia.

This manifestation of his illness roused Cañamèl from his torpor. He knew what this was. The cursed dampness of Palmar that had got into his legs because of his inactivity. And he obeyed Neleta, who counselled him to make a change of environment. At Ruzafa they had, like all the wealthy folk of Palmar, their hired cottage for purposes of recuperation. There they could have the services of the Valencian physicians and apothecaries. Cañamèl took the trip, accompanied by his wife's aunt, and was away for a fortnight. But scarcely had the swelling gone down a trifle than he wished to return, asserting that he was already well. He could not live without his Neleta. At Ruzafa he had felt the chill of death when, calling his wife, there would come in reply to the summons her aunt, with her wrinkled face and her eelish looks.

He resumed his old habits, and Cañamèl's feeble whining would resound continually in the tavern.

At the beginning of autumn he was forced to return to Ruzafa, worse than ever. The swelling was commencing to extend over his legs, which were huge and disfigured by rheumatism, looking for all the world like those of an elephant; he dragged them along with difficulty, leaning upon his nearest neighbor and emitting a groan every time his foot touched the ground.

Neleta accompanied her husband to the mail-boat. Her aunt had gone on ahead, in the morning, on the "eel cart," to get the cottage at Ruzafa in readiness.

At night, after closing the tavern and going to bed, Neleta thought she could hear from the direction of the canal a soft whistling that she had known from childhood. She pried open a window to see. *He* was there! He paced up and down like a poor dog, in the vain hope that the house would be opened for him. Neleta then closed the window and returned to bed. Tonet's proposal was sheer folly. She couldn't be such a fool as to compromise her future in a rapture of juvenile passion. As her enemy Samaruca said, she knew more than an old woman.

Flattered, nevertheless, by Tonet's passionate pursuit, for he came running to her as soon as he imagined she would be alone, the tavern-keeper's wife fell asleep thinking of her lover. They must be patient and let time pass. Perhaps, when they least expected it, their former happiness would burgeon forth anew.

Tonet's life had undergone a new change. He became a good son once again, returned to his father's roof, to the work in the fields, which were by now almost covered with earth, thanks to Tío Tòni's tenacity.

The Cubano's misdeeds had come to an end. The civil guard of the Ruzafa district paid frequent visits to the forest. Those mustachioed soldiers, with inquisitorial faces, convinced him of their determination to answer with a bullet the very first shot that he discharged in the pine groves. The Cubano heeded the warning. Those fellows in the yellow belts were not like the guards of the Dehesa: they could leave him stretched out at the foot of a tree, and afterwards they would hush up the matter with a report giving their own version of the deed. He discharged Sangonera, and once again the vagrant went back to his wandering life, crowning himself with the flowers

of the banks whenever he was drunk, and seeking over the lake the mystic apparition that had so impressed him.

Tonet, on his side, hung up his musket in his father's cabin, and swore before it an oath of everlasting repentance. He wished to be taken henceforth as a dignified man. He would be respectful and kind to Tío Tòni, just as the latter had been with his grandfather. He had sown his wild oats, and that time was gone forever. His father, deeply moved, embraced Tonet, (something he had not done since his son had returned from Cuba) and together they devoted themselves to the filling-in of the fields with the ardor of one who sees his labors about to be crowned with success.

Sadness endowed Tonet with new strength, hardening his will-power. Impelled by passion, which was gnawing at his entrails, he had hovered about the tavern for several nights, knowing that Neleta was alone. He had noticed the shutters of a window being slightly pushed apart and then closed again. Doubtless she had recognized him, yet in spite of this she had said nothing, remaining unapproachable. All that was left to him now was the affection of his own people. And he grew closer and closer to Tío Tòni and to La Borda, sharing their illusions and their disappointments, partaking of their poverty and filling them with astonishment at the simplicity of his habits, for he scarcely drank now and would spend the evenings telling his father all about his adventures as a guerrillero. La Borda was radiant with happiness, and whenever she spoke with a neighbor she praised her brother. Poor Tonet! How good he was! How happy he made his father when he wished! . . .

Neleta suddenly left the tavern to go to Ruzafa. So great was her haste, that she did not care to wait for the mail-boat, and summoned Tío Paloma, to have him take her in his skiff to Saler, to the harbor of Catarroja, to any part of the mainland whence she could leave for Ruzafa.

Cañamèl was very low: he was in agony. This was not the most important part of the news to Neleta. Her aunt had arrived that morning with tidings that had left her motionless with surprise behind the counter. La Samaruca had been in Ruzafa for the past four days. She had established herself in the house as a relative, and the poor aunt had not dared to protest. Besides, she had brought with her a nephew, whom she loved as if he were her own son, and who lived with her: the same whom Tonet had struck during the night of the *albaes*. At first the nurse had said nothing, like the kind, simple woman she was: they were relatives of Cañamèl, and she was not so wicked-hearted as to deprive the invalid of these visitors. But afterward she had heard certain conversations between Cañamèl and his sister-in-law. That old witch was doing her best to convince him that nobody cared for him so much as she and her nephew. She spoke of Neleta, declaring that as soon as he had left on his trip, Tío Paloma's grandson had taken to entering his house every night. Besides. . . . (here the old woman hesitated out of fear) on the previous day two men had been brought into the house by La Samaruca and her nephew: one who questioned Cañamèl in a low voice, and the other who wrote down what he said. It must be his will.

At this news Neleta revealed her true character. Her

cajoling voice with its sugary inflexions turned hoarse; the clear pupils of her eyes glittered like tinsel, and a wave of greenish pallor coursed over her white skin.

*"Recordóns!"* she roared, like any of the boatmen who patronized her tavern.

And was it for this she had married Cañamèl? Was it for this she had put up with an incurable disease, forcing herself to appear kind and affectionate? Within her stirred in all its vast power the egotism of the rustic maiden who places wordly interest above love.

Her first impulse was to beat her aunt for taking so long in bringing her the news, when perhaps it was too late to remedy matters. But such an explosion of anger would have meant a loss of time, and she preferred to rush to Tío Paloma's boat in such a hurry that she herself grasped an oar to get as soon as possible out of the canal and raise sail.

In the middle of the afternoon she entered the cottage at Ruzafa like a whirlwind. At sight of her La Samaruca paled, and instinctively backed toward the door; but before she could manage to escape she caught a resounding blow from Neleta, and the two women seized each other's hair in a mute struggle, panting with muffled rage, rolling about from one corner to the other, bumping against the walls, overturning the furniture, their fingers tightly grasping each other's chignon, like two yoked oxen who fight with their heads joined, unable to separate.

La Samaruca was strong and inspired a certain fear among the gossips of Palmar, but Neleta, behind her sweet smile and her melodious voice concealed a snake's agility and bit her enemy in the face with such fury that she swallowed the blood.

"What is that?" groaned Cañamèl's voice from an adjoining room. The noise of the brawl had frightened him. *"Qué pasa?* . . . What's going on? . . ."

The doctor, who happened to be with him, came out of the bed-room, and aided by La Samaruca's nephew, managed to separate the two women, after great effort and not without receiving plenty of scratches. The neighbors were knocking at the door. They admired the blind fury with which women fight, and praised the pluck of the little blonde, who was crying because she could not vent her wrath in full.

Cañamèl's sister-in-law fled, followed by her nephew; the door of the house was shut, and Neleta, with hair all dishevelled and her white complexion reddened by scratches, entered her husband's room, after wiping off the other woman's blood that stained her teeth.

Cañamèl was a wreck. His feet were swollen to monstrous size: the œdema, according to the physician, was already extending to the stomach, and his mouth had the livid, bluish hue of a corpse.

He seemed more massive than ever when he sat in his rope chair, his head sunk between his shoulders, fallen into an apoplectic torpor, out of which he would waken only with great effort. He did not ask for the reason of the hubbub, as if he had at once forgotten it, and only on beholding his wife did he make a languid gesture of joy and murmur:

"I'm a very sick man. . . . Very sick."

He could not move. No sooner did he lie down than he would stifle, and they had to run and raise him as if his last hour had come.

Neleta made arrangements to remain there. La Sa-

maruca would play no more tricks. She would not desert her husband until she brought him back safe and well to the town.

But she herself made a gesture of incredulity at the chances of Cañamèl being able to return to La Albufera. The physicians did not conceal their pessimistic opinions. He would die of cardiac rheumatism, of asystole. It was an incurable disease; at the least expected moment his heart would fail to contract and all would be over.

Neleta did not leave her husband's side. Those gentlemen who had written papers at his dictation did not go out of her thoughts. Cañamèl's stupor infuriated her; she wished to learn what he had dictated under the cursed inspiration of La Samaruca, and she tried to shake him out of his lethargy.

But Tío Paco, when for a moment he would gather his wits, would always answer the same. He had arranged everything perfectly. If she were good, if she loved him as much as she so often swore to him, she need fear naught.

Two days later Cañamèl died in his mat-weed armchair, asphyxiated by asthma, swollen everywhere, and his legs livid.

Neleta hardly wept. Something else was on her mind. When the corpse had left for the cemetery and she found herself free from the solace that the people of Ruzafa had trid to bring her, she thought only of seeking out the notary who had drawn up the will, and of discovering what her husband had dictated.

Her wish did not wait long for fulfillment. Cañamèl had arranged everything perfectly, as he had said in his final moments.

He declared Neleta his heiress, leaving no other bequests and naming no other executors. But he ordered that if she ever married again, or showed by her conduct that she was maintaining amorous relations with any man, that part of the fortune which he could legally dispose of should pass to his sister-in-law and to all other relatives of his first wife.

## VIII

NOBODY could say just how Tonet returned to Cañamèl's tavern.

The customers saw him one morning seated before a little table, playing at cards with Sangonera and other town idlers, and nobody thought it strange. It was natural that Tonet should frequent a place that belonged exclusively to Neleta.

The Cubano again spent his entire time there, abandoning anew his father, who had placed faith in his total conversion. But now there was no longer that confidence between him and the tavern-keeper's wife that had so scandalized Palmar with its suspiciously fraternal intimacy. Neleta, garbed in mourning, stood behind the counter, protected by a certain air of authority. She seemed to have grown taller upon finding herself rich and free. She jested less with the customers; she revealed a most rigid virtue; she would frown and bite her lips at the jests to which the customers were habituated, and should some drinker so much as brush against her bare arms as he took his glass, Neleta would show her claws and threaten to throw him through the door.

The patronage grew after the disappearance of the swollen, ailing spectre of Cañamèl. The wine served by the widow seemed to taste better, and once again the little taverns of Palmar were deserted.

Tonet did not dare to look at Neleta, as if he feared

the comments of the public. La Samaruca's tongue was wagging enough as it was, seeing him once more in the tavern! He played, he drank, he would take a seat in a corner, as Cañamèl had done in other days, and he seemed to be fascinated, dominated from a distance by that woman who looked at everybody except him.

Tío Paloma, with his habitual cunning, understood his grandson's situation. He was always there so as not to displease the widow, who wished to have him under her eye and exercise boundless authority over him. Tonet "was mounting guard," as the old man put it, and although from time to time he felt very much like leaving for the lake and doing some hunting, he would be silent and remain in his place, doubtless fearing Neleta's recriminations when they should be left alone.

She had suffered much indeed recently, compelled to endure the dying Cañamèl's whims, and now that she was wealthy and free she was revenging herself, making Tonet feel the weight of her authority.

The poor young man, astonished at the celerity with which death had arranged everything, could not yet believe his good fortune whenever he found himself in Cañamèl's house, free of all fear that the infuriated tavern-keeper would appear at any moment. Gazing upon this abundance, of which Neleta was the sole proprietor, he obeyed every order of the widow.

She watched over him with exacting affection, resembling somewhat the severity of a mother.

"Don't drink any more," she would say to Tonet, who, incited by Sangonera, would venture to ask for more at the bar.

Tío Paloma's grandson, as obedient as a child, would

refuse to drink and would remain motionless in his seat, respected by all, for none was unaware of his relations with the owner of the establishment.

The customers, who had witnessed their intimacy during Cañamèl's days, found it logical that there should be an understanding between the two. Hadn't they been sweethearts? Hadn't they been so much in love that they had excited Tío Paco's jealousy? . . . Now they would marry, as soon as the months of waiting required of the widow should pass, and the Cubano would put on the airs of the legitimate owner behind that counter which he had appropriated as a lover.

The only ones who refused to accept this solution were La Samaruca and her relatives. Neleta would not marry: they were positive. That woman with the honeyed tongue was too wicked to do things as God ordains. Rather than make the sacrifice of yielding to the first wife's relatives that which was their rightful share, she would prefer to live clandestinely with the Cubano. That was nothing new for her. Cañamèl had seen stranger things than that before he died! . . .

Spurred on by the testament that held out to them the possibility of becoming rich, and by the conviction that Neleta was certainly not going to make the road clear for them by marrying, La Samaruca and her folk carried on a close espionage of the lovers.

At night, in the small hours, when the tavern had already been closed, the fierce virago, wrapped in her shawl, would spy upon the customers as they came out, seeking Tonet among them.

She would see Sangonera staggering off to his hovel. His companions would follow him with their jests, asking

him whether he had met the Italian scissors-grinder again. And in the midst of his drunkenness he would for a moment grow clear in mind. . . . Sinners! It seemed impossible that men like them, who professed to be Christians, should make fun of that meeting! . . . The Omnipotent would come in due time, and their punishment would be not to recognize Him, not to follow Him, thus being deprived of the felicity reserved for the elect.

Sometimes, when Sangonera would be left standing alone before his shanty, La Samaruca would accost him, looming forth from the darkness like a witch. Where was Tonet? But the vagabond would smile maliciously, guessing the intentions of the termagant. Trying to sound him, was she! And waving his arms about in a vague gesture, as if he wished to encompass all of the Albufera, he would answer:

"Tonet? *Per lo mon; per lo mon.* Somewhere about. Somewhere."

La Samaruca was indefatigable in her investigations. Before daybreak she would already have taken up her place before the cabin of the Palomas, and when La Borda opened the door, the witch would start a conversation with the girl, in the meantime casting avid glances into the dwelling to see if Tonet were inside.

Neleta's implacable enemy became certain that the young man spent his nights in the tavern. What a scandal! And only a few months after Cañamèl had died! But what irritated her most about this audacious love affair was that the tavern-keeper's testament should be left unfulfilled and that half of his property should continue to remain in the widow's power, instead of reverting to the relatives of the first wife. La Samaruca made trips to

Valencia: she made inquiries of persons who had the law at their finger-tips, and spent the time in continuous agitation, hovering for nights in the vicinity of the tavern, accompanied by relatives who were to serve as her witnesses. She would wait for Tonet to leave the tavern just before dawn, thus proving his relations with the widow. But the doors of the tavern did not open during the whole night: the house remained dark and silent, as if all within its walls slept the sleep of virtue. In the morning, when the tavern opened, Neleta would appear calmly behind the counter, smiling, fresh, looking everybody straight in the eye, as one who has an untroubled conscience; much later, Tonet would appear as if by magic, and the customers could not say for sure whether he had come in through the street door or the rear-door that faced the canal.

It was difficult to catch that couple. La Samaruca despaired, realizing Neleta's cunning. In order to avoid the possibility of tales being told, Neleta had discharged the tavern servant, replacing her by her aunt,—that old, spineless woman who was resigned to everything, and who felt a certain respect not unmixed with fear before her niece's violent temper and the wealth of her widowhood.

The vicar, Don Miguel, who had learned of La Samaruca's underhanded work, more than once collared Tonet, sermonizing him on the wise course of avoiding a scandal. They ought to marry: any day at all they might be surprised by the provisional beneficiaries of the will, and all Albufera would ring with the gossip. Even if it meant that Neleta should lose part of the inheritance, was it not better to live as God ordains, without subter-

fuges and lies? The Cubano shrugged his shoulders. He was eager for the marriage, but she was the one that had the say. Neleta was the only woman in Palmar who, with her accustomed sweet ways, dared to confront the vicar; for this reason she grew indignant upon hearing his rebuke. It was all a pack of lies! She lived a blameless life. She needed no men. All she required was a helper in the tavern and she had selected Tonet, her childhood chum. . . . Was there anything wrong in her choosing, in a house like hers, bearing an appreciable investment, the person whom she thought most worthy of confidence? She knew well enough that all this was the work of La Samaruca's slanderous tongue, so that Neleta should give her the rice fields of her late husband; the half of a fortune to the accumulation of which she had contributed as an honest, industrious wife. But if that witch imagined she was going to get the inheritance, she had better guess again! Sooner would the whole lake of Albufera dry up!

The greed of the rural woman revealed itself in Neleta with a fiery determination capable of the wildest acts. There awoke in her the instinct of several generations of wretched fisherfolk in the clutches of poverty, who had enviously glowered upon the riches of those who possessed fields and sold wine to the poor, slowly getting possession of their money. She recalled her hungering childhood, the days of abandonment when she would stand humbly at the door of the Palomas waiting for Tonet's mother to take pity upon her; the efforts she had made to win her husband and to endure him during his illness; and now that she was the richest woman in Palmar, was she, because of a few scruples, to share her fortune with persons who had always done her harm? She

felt capable of committing a crime rather than giving a pin to her enemies. The possibility that La Samaruca might own a part of the rice lands that she cultivated with such passion made her see red with anger, and her fingers would contract with the same fury that had sent her flying upon her enemy in Ruzafa.

The possession of wealth transformed her. She was exceedingly fond of Tonet, but as between him and her fortune, she was never in doubt as to sacrificing her lover. If she were to abandon Tonet he would return sooner or later, for his existence was forever linked to her own; but if she relinquished the tiniest portion of her heritage, she would never see it again.

It was for this reason that she received so indignantly the timid proposals which Tonet would advance at night in the silence of the tavern's upper story.

The Cubano was dissatisfied with this life of flight and concealment. He wished to be the legal owner of the tavern; to dazzle the populace with his new dignity, to mingle as man to man with the folk that had despised him. Besides (and this he concealed carefully from her), as Neleta's husband he would fear her domineering character less,—the despotism of the rich woman who can throw her lover through the door and abuse her power. Since she loved him, why did they not marry?

But as Tonet would utter these suggestions in the gloom of the bedroom the corn straw of the mattress would rustle with Neleta's impatient movements. Her voice grew hoarse with rage. . . . He, too? . . . . No, my boy; she knew what she had to do, and she was asking no advice. Things were well enough as they were. Did he lack anything? Did he not have the use of everything as

if he were the owner? Why, then, let Don Miguel marry them, only to be forced, after the ceremony, to give up half the fortune into the filthy hands of La Samaruca? Sooner would she let her arm be cut off than amputate her inheritance. Besides, she knew the world; she used to leave the lake regions now and then, she went to the city, where the grand gentlemen admired her pertness, and she hadn't failed to notice that what was considered a fortune in Palmar was not even respectable poverty outside of the Albufera. She was ambitious. She wasn't always going to stand behind a bar filling glasses and dealing with drunkards; she wished to end her days in Valencia, in a house of her own, like a lady who lives on her income. She would lend out her money with greater business ability than Cañamèl. She would use her wits to see that the fortune should reproduce with tireless fecundity, and when she should have become truly rich, she would perhaps decide to reach an agreement with La Samaruca, giving over to that witch what she would then look upon as a mere pittance. When such a time should come, he might speak to her about marriage, if he continued to behave and obeyed her without causing any trouble. But as for the present,—No, *recordóns!*—no marrying and no giving any money to anybody.

And she expressed herself so energetically that Tonet did not dare to reply. Besides, he, the youth who had tried to impose himself upon the rest of the town by his bravery, felt himself dominated by Neleta, and was afraid of her, seeing that he was not so securely established in her affections as he had at first believed.

It was not that Neleta had grown weary of their love. She loved him, but her wealth gave her a great advantage

over him. Besides, mutual possession during the endless winter nights, in the closed tavern without any risk of discovery, had blunted in her the excitement of danger, the quivering voluptuousness that thrilled her during Cañamèl's time, when they would kiss behind the doors or have their hasty meetings in the suburbs of Palmar, always exposed to some surprise.

After four months of this almost marital life, with no other obstacle than La Samaruca's vigilant but easily eluded surveillance, Tonet thought for a moment that his matrimonial desires might be realized. Neleta appeared preoccupied and worried. The vertical wrinkle between her brows betrayed painful thoughts. On the slightest pretext she would quarrel with Tonet; she would insult him, repel him and complain of his love, cursing the moment of weakness in which she had opened her arms to him; but afterward, impelled by the desires of the flesh, she would accept him anew, giving herself over completely, as if the grief that burdened her were irreparable.

Her uneven and nervous humor would transform their nights of love into agitated meetings, during which caresses would alternate with recriminations, and it needed but little for the mouths that had shortly before been joined in a kiss to snap and bite at each other. At last, one night, Neleta, in words that flamed with rage, revealed the secret of her condition. She had kept silent up to then, being in doubt as to her misfortune; but now, after two months of observation, she was certain. She was to become a mother. . . . Tonet was terrified and content at the same time, while she continued to rail. That would have all been very well had it taken place without any danger while Cañamèl was still alive. But the devil, who doubt-

less had his hand in this, had considered it better to have the obstacles arise in difficult moments, when she was interested in concealing her love affair so as to deprive her enemies of advantage.

Tonet, after the first moment of surprise had passed, asked her timidly what she intended to do. In the tremor of his voice she divined her lover's hidden thoughts, and she burst into raucous, ironic laughter, which revealed the temper of her soul. Ah! Did he imagine that for such a little thing she was going to marry him? He did not know her. He could rest assured that she would sooner kill herself than surrender to her enemies. What was hers belonged to her in every detail, and she would defend her property. Not on this account was Tonet to be married, for there's a remedy for everything in this world!...

This explosion of rage at the trick Nature had played, surprising them at the moment when they felt most secure, blew over; Neleta and Tonet continued their lives as if nothing had occurred, shunning any mention of the barrier that had arisen between them, growing familiar with it, easy in the thought that its realization was still far in the future and trusting vaguely in some unforeseen circumstance that should intervene to save them.

Neleta, without mentioning it to her lover, sought means to rid herself of the new life that she felt pulsing in her bosom, like a threat against her greed.

Her aunt, frightened by Neleta's communication, spoke of powerful remedies. She recalled her conversations with the old women of Palmar as they would lament the rapidity with which families grow amidst poverty. On the advice of her niece, she went to Ruzafa or to the city

to consult herb-doctors who enjoyed a shady reputation among the lowest social strata, returning with mysterious remedies composed of nauseating ingredients that upset the stomach.

Tonet many a night encountered on Neleta's body evil-smelling plasters in which she placed the greatest faith: poultices of wild plants, which lent to their nights of love a certain atmosphere of sorcery.

But all these cures in time revealed their inefficacy. The months passed and Neleta, in great despair, realized the futility of her efforts.

As her aunt said, that hidden creature had a good hold on her, and it was in vain that Neleta strove to do away with it.

The meetings of the lovers during the night were stormy. It seemed that Cañamèl was avenging himself, rising between them and thrusting one against the other.

Neleta wept with despair, accusing Tonet of her misfortune. He was to blame: it was his fault that her future was now threatened. And when, in the nervous tension of her condition, she wearied of heaping insults upon the Cubano, she would fix her furious eyes upon her abdomen, which, freed of her oppression to which it was subject during the day in order to deceive the curiosity of strangers, seemed each night to increase monstrously. Neleta hated with a savage fury that hidden being which stirred in her womb, and with closed fist she would strike herself brutally, as if she wished to crush it within its warm folds.

Tonet, too, hated it, seeing in it a menace. Infected with Neleta's greed, he thought with terror of the loss

of part of that heritage which he considered his own.

He brought to mind all the remedies that he had heard mentioned in a vague way during the free-spoken conversations among the boatmen, and advised his paramour to use them. These were brutal attempts, assaults against Nature that caused one's hair to stand on end, or else ridiculous remedies that would cause a smile. But Neleta's health mocked everything. That body, which was apparently so delicate, was strong and solid, and continued in silence to fulfill the most serious function of Nature, nor could any evil desires obstruct or delay the sacred work of fecundity.

The months passed. Neleta had to make great efforts, to suffer intense pain in order to hide her condition from the whole town. In the morning she would tighten her corset in such a cruel manner that she made Tonet shiver. Many a time she would lack the strength to restrain this expansion of maternity.

"Pull. . . . pull!" she would say, giving her lover the strings of her corset with a wild look, compressing her lips to hold back the groans.

And Tonet would pull, feeling a cold sweat break out on his forehead, trembling at the will displayed by this little woman, who stifled her moans and swallowed the tears of her torture.

She would paint her face and deluge herself with cheap perfume so that she might appear as fresh and beautiful as ever in the tavern, and prevent anybody from reading in her face the symptoms of her condition. La Samaruca, who sniffed like a setter about the house, scented some thing unusual as she would cast her rapid glances into

the place when she passed by the door. The other women, with the experience of their sex, guessed what was happening to the tavern proprietress.

An atmosphere of suspicion and vigilance seemed to spring up around Neleta. There was much whispering in the cabin doors. La Samaruca and her relatives disputed with the women who refused to accept her assertions. The gossipy women, instead of sending their little ones to the tavern for wine or oil, would plant themselves in person before the counter, seeking with various pretexts to make the proprietress rise from her chair, to make her move, while they would follow her with a devouring glance, surveying the lines of her tightened figure.

"She certainly *is*," some would say in triumph when they met their neighbors.

"She's not," shouted others. *"Tot son mentires.* It's all lies."

And Neleta, who guessed the cause of all this coming and going, would receive the inquisitive gossips with a scoffing smile. . . . Such welcome visitors! What fly had bitten them that they could not get along without seeing her? . . . . It seemed as if there were a jubilee in her house! . . . .

But this insolent merriment, and the audacity with which she would confront the curiosity of the women, would evaporate at night, after a day of asphyxiating torment and forced serenity. When she would release herself from the cuirass of whalebone, her courage would suddenly vanish, like that of the soldier who has outdone himself in a heroic exploit and can do no more. She would be attacked by despair as soon as her swollen abdomen was relieved from oppression. She would think

with terror of the torture she would be compelled to suffer the next day in order to conceal her condition.

She was at the end of her powers. She, who was so strong, herself admitted it to Tonet during the silence of one of those nights which were no longer given up to love, but to worry and doleful confidences. Cursed health! How she envied those sickly women in whose womb life may never germinate! . . .

During these dispirited moments she spoke of flight, of leaving the tavern in charge of her aunt, taking refuge in some remote section of the city until she should get out of her difficult pass. But on thinking it over she would see at once how useless such flight would be. The vision of La Samaruca rose before her. To flee would be equivalent to confessing to what was until now merely a suspicion. Where could she go without being followed by Cañamèl's ferocious sister-in-law? . . .

Besides, it was the end of summer. She was about to gather the harvest of her rice-fields, and the entire town's curiosity would be aroused by such an unjustified absence in the case of a woman who was known to watch over her interests so zealously.

She would stay. She would face the danger: if she remained in her place she would be watched less closely. She thought with terror of the birth,—a painful mystery that seemed all the more gloomy, engulfed as it was for her in the shadows of the unknown, and she tried to forget her fear by busying herself with the matters of the harvest, haggling with the hired hands over the price of their labor. She scolded Tonet, who had been sent by her to watch over the day-workers, but who, instead, would always carry along in the boat Cañamèl's gun and

his faithful hound, Centella, giving himself up more to hunting game than to counting the sheaves of rice.

Some afternoons she would leave the tavern in charge of her aunt and go off to the thrashing-floor, a square of hardened mud in the middle of the water of the fields. These trips served to calm her in her painful situation.

Hidden behind the sheaves she would loosen her corset with a wracked expression and sit down beside Tonet, upon the huge heap of rice straw, which scattered a pungent odor. At her feet the horses would be turning about in their monotonous task of threshing, and before them the lake of Albufera stretched its vast sheet of green, reflecting the red and bluish mountains that girded the horizon.

These serene afternoons calmed the disquietude of the two lovers. They felt happier than in the cooped-up bedroom, whose darkness was peopled with terror. The lake smiled gently as it cast forth from its entrails the yearly harvest; the songs of the threshers and the crews of the large boats laden with rice seemed to lull the mother Albufera to sleep after that birth which assured life to the children on its shores.

The afternoon calm softened Neleta's irritated temperament, filling her with renewed confidence. She counted on her fingers the course of the months and the end of the gestation that was taking place within her. But little time remained for the painful event that might change her entire life. It would be the following month, November, perhaps during the celebration of the great holidays in honor of San Martín and Santa Catalina. As she counted, she recalled that it was not yet a year since Cañamèl had died; and in her perverse, unconscionable

way, eager to arrange her life in harmony with her own happiness, she regretted not having given herself to Tonet months before. Thus she would have been able to reveal her condition without fear, attributing the paternity of the new creature to her husband.

The possibility that death might intervene in her plight reawakened her hopes. Who could tell whether after so many tortures and terrors the creature would not be born dead? It would not be the first case of the kind. And the lovers, deceived by this illusion, spoke of the dead child as of a certain, inevitable occurrence, and Neleta watched closely every movement in her womb, greatly content when the hidden creature showed no signs of life. It would die! That was certain. That good luck which had ever companioned her was not going to foresake her now.

The end of the harvest diverted her mind from these worries. The sacks of rice were heaped up in the tavern. The harvest occupied all the inner rooms of the house, and the sacks were heaped up even close to the counter, taking away room from the customers; some had to be placed in Neleta's bedroom. She gloated at the riches enclosed in these sacks, and was intoxicated by the pungent fumes of the fine, astringent dust. And to think that half of that treasure might have gone to La Samaruca! . . . At the mere thought Neleta felt her strength return with her anger. She was suffering intensely with the painful concealment of her condition, but sooner death than to resign herself to such robbery.

And she had sore need of these energetic resolutions. Her condition was getting worse. Her feet were swelling, and she felt an irresistible desire to remain motionless, to

lie abed; but despite this she appeared behind the counter every day as usual, for the pretext of illness might kindle suspicions. She moved slowly when the customers obliged her to get up, and her forced smile was a painful contraction that caused Tonet to shudder. Her clamped figure seemed on the point of bursting through the powerful enclosure of whalebone.

"I'm worn out!" she would groan, falling in a heap across the bed.

The two lovers, in the silence of the bedroom, would talk, struck with terror, as if they could see the menacing spectre of their guilt rise before them. . . . And suppose the child were not born dead? . . .Neleta was sure that it wouldn't be. She could feel it stir in her womb with a strength that banished her criminal hope.

Her rebellion, that of a greedy woman incapable of confessing her sin to her material detriment, filled her with the bold resolution of great criminals.

She would not hear of taking the child to a town in the vicinity of Albufera, and seeking a faithful woman to bring it up. She would have always to be fearing the nurse's indiscretion, the wiliness of her enemies, and even the parents' own lack of prudence, for they would take a natural liking to the creature and finally betray themselves. Neleta reasoned with a terrifying coldness, gazing at the sacks of rice heaped up in her bedroom. Neither could they consider concealing it in Valencia. La Samaruca, once on the track, would seek out the truth in hell itself.

Neleta fixed her green eyes upon her lover; they seemed to bulge with the anguish of her pain and the danger of their situation. They must abandon the infant as soon as

it would be born, no matter how. He must take heart. It is in such dangers that men reveal their worth. He would carry it off at night to the city, would abandon it on some street, at the door of a church, anywhere at all: Valencia is a big place. . . . And let anybody guess who the parents were!

The harsh woman, after proposing the crime, tried to find excuses for her wickedness. Perhaps this abandonment would prove a boon to the child. If it died, all the better for it; and if it were saved, who knew in what hands it might fall! Perhaps riches awaited it: stranger tales were told. And she recalled the stories she had heard in her childhood, all about the children of kings abandoned in forests, or shepherds' illegitimate offspring, who, instead of being devoured by the wolves, rose to positions of power.

Tonet listened in terror. He tried to oppose her, but Neleta's glance chained fear to his will, which had never been strong. Besides, he, too, was corrupted by greed: he considered all Neleta's property his own, and he grew indignant at the prospect of having to share his beloved's heritage with their enemies. His indecision made him shut his eyes to everything, and he trusted to the future. The affair was by no means in a desperate state: he would arrange everything yet. Perhaps by some stroke of good luck the dilemma would be resolved at the last moment.

And he enjoyed a momentary tranquillity, letting the time go by without giving a thought to Neleta's criminal proposals.

He was united to her forever: she was his entire family. The tavern was already his only home. He had broken with his father, who, having got wind of the town gossip

about the youth's marital life with the proprietress, and seeing that the weeks and months went by without the son sleeping a single night in the cabin, had a stormy, painful interview with him. What Tonet was doing was dishonor to the Palomas. He could not bear to have as his son a man who publicly lived at the expense of a woman who was not his wife. Since he wished to live in dishonor, away from his family and unwilling to help it. . . . let it be as if they did not know each other! He was now without a father: he could have him back again only when he should recover his honor. And Tío Tòni, after this explanation, continued with La Borda's faithful aid the filling-in of his fields. Now that the vast enterprise was nearing completion, he felt discouraged: he asked himself sadly who there would be to thank him for all his efforts, and only his habitual toiler's tenacity kept him plugging ahead at his task.

There came the season of the great hunting celebrations: San Martín and Santa Catalina,—the fiestas of Saler.

At all the meetings of the boatmen there was enthusiastic talk about the great number of birds that there were this year in the lake of Albufera. The guards, who from a distance spied upon the spots and the thickets where the coots would gather, noticed their rapid increase. They formed large black patches on the surface of the water. Whenever a boat passed by close to them they would open their wings and fly in a triangular group to a position somewhat farther off, like a cloud of locusts, hypnotized by the sheen of the lake and unable to abandon the waters in which death awaited them.

The news had spread through the province, and the

hunters would be more numerous than in previous years.

The great hunting-expeditions of La Albufera stirred every Valencian gun. These were ancient festivities, the origin of which had been learned by Tío Paloma at the time when he kept the Warden's documents. He would relate it to his tavern friends.

When Albufera belonged to the monarchs of Aragón, and only the royal house was permitted to hunt there, King Don Martín had desired to grant the citizens of Valencia a holiday, and he chose that of his birthday saint. Afterwards, the hunt was repeated similarly on Santa Catalina's day. During these two holidays all the people could freely enter the lake with their cross bows and hunt the innumerable birds of the reed grass, and the privilege, converted into a tradition, had continued through the centuries. Now the free hunting privileges were preceded by two days of preliminaries, during which the lessee of Albufera was paid for the privilege of choosing the best locations, and hunters from all the towns of the province flocked there for the drawing.

There were not enough boats or boatmen to serve all the hunters. Tío Paloma, known for so many years by the sportsmen, was at a loss how to meet all his orders. For a long time previous he had made arrangements to serve a wealthy gentleman who paid very handsomely for his long experience with conditions in the Albufera. Yet despite this the hunters continued to address themselves to the dean of the boatmen, and Tío Paloma went here and there seeking skiffs and men to act as guides for all the persons who wrote to him from Valencia.

On the eve of the drawing, Tonet saw his grandfather enter the tavern. The old man was coming for him. That

year the Albufera was going to have more guns than birds. He was at his wits' end for boatmen. All those of Saler, of Catarroja and even of Palmar were already hired: and now an old customer whom he could refuse nothing, had asked him to provide a man and a boat for a friend of his who was going hunting for the first time in the Albufera. Would Tonet be that man, and thus get his grandfather out of a predicament? The Cubano refused. Neleta was ill. In the morning she had left the counter, unable to stand the pain. The moment so long feared would perhaps arrive very soon, and he must be in the tavern.

But his laconic negative was interpreted by his grandfather as an insult, and the old man became furious. Because he was now rich he permitted himself to scorn his poor grandfather, leaving him in such a ridiculous position! He could tolerate everything: he had suffered from the boy's laziness when they were working the *redolí*; he had closed his eyes to his conduct with the tavern-keeper's wife,—doings that had not brought much honor to the family; but to desert him in a plight that he considered a matter of honor? Christ! What would his city friends say when they saw that in Albufera, where they believed him to be master, he could not find a man to serve them? And his gloom was so great, so visible, that Tonet was seized with remorse. To deny his aid during the great hunting-holidays was to Tío Paloma an insult to his prestige and at the same time something like a betrayal of that country of reeds and mud where he had been born.

The Cubano resignedly yielded to his grandfather's entreaty. It seemed to him, moreover, that Neleta could

wait. For some time past she had been alarmed by deceptive pains, and the present crisis would pass like the others.

Tonet arrived in Saler at nightfall. As one of the boatmen, it was his duty to be present at the *demaná,* witnessing the distribution of posts together with his huntsman.

The village of Saler (which was at some distance from the lake, at the end of a canal in the direction of Valencia) presented an extraordinary appearance because of the hunting holidays.

In that broad opening of the canal which was called the Port, the black skiffs bumped against each other by the dozen, without any room in which to stir, their thin gunwales creaking against each other and quivering with the weight of the huge, wooden, barrel-like structures that were to be fixed on the next day to stakes planted in the mud. Inside these barrels the hunters would lay in hiding to shoot at the birds.

Between the houses of Saler some pretty girls of the city had set up their tables of toasted beans and mouldy nougats, lighted by candles protected by paper cones. In the doors of the cabins the women were heating the coffee-pots, offering glasses flavored with liquor, in which there was more liquor than coffee; and a swarming populace bustled in the town, swelled every moment by the carts and the vans that came from the city. These were citizens of Valencia, with their high gaiters and large felt hats, like warriors of the Transvaal, proudly strutting about and showing off their blouses with their innumerable pockets, whistling to their dogs and exhibiting their modern guns inside the yellow cases that hung from their

shoulders; wealthy farmers of the provincial towns, in bright cloaks and with their cartridge belts over their sashes, some with their kerchief rolled up in the shape of a mitre, others wearing it like a turban, or letting it float down over their necks,—all of them revealing by their head-dress just what corner of Valencia they came from.

The gun seemed to level all the hunters. They treated one another with the fraternity of companions in arms, thrilling at the thought of the coming holiday; and they spoke of English powder, of Belgian guns, of the excellency of centre-fire cartridges, trembling with the fierce voluptuousness of Arabs, as if the smoke of the discharge rose from their very words. The dogs,—huge, silent creatures, with their instinctively keen glances,—went from group to group sniffing the hands of the hunters, until they stopped at the side of their master. In all the cabins, which were now converted into inns, the women were preparing supper with the activity characteristic of holidays that brought in enough to live on for most of the year.

Tonet saw the house called The Royal Children,—a low stone structure, with a high tile roof cut by several dormer-windows; an old eighteenth-century edifice which had gradually been crumbling to ruins since the hunters of royal blood had ceased to visit the Albufera, and which at present was occupied by a tavern. Opposite was the house of the *Demaná*, a two-story building, which seemed gigantic amidst the cabins, revealing in its defaced walls various grilled fanlights and above the roof a bell to summon the huntsmen to the distribution of posts.

Tonet entered this house, casting a glance at the hall of the lower story, where the ceremony took place. A huge

lantern shed a dim light about the table and the chairs of the lessees of Albufera. The platform was separated from the rest of the room by an iron railing.

Tío Paloma was there, as the dean of the boatmen, jesting with the noted huntsmen, fanatic lovers of the lake whom he had known for half a century. These were the aristocracy of the hunt. There were rich and poor among them: some were wealthy proprietors and others butchers from the city or modest farmers from the nearby towns. They did not see each other or seek each other during the rest of the year, but when they met in the Albufera of a Saturday, at the minor drawings, or assembled in the great annual ones, they would approach one another with brotherly affection, offering one another tobacco, cartridges, and listening without blinking to stupendous tales of hunting expeditions in the mountains during the summer. Community of tastes and fondness for telling lies joined them in fraternal bonds. Almost all of them bore on their bodies signs of the risks incurred in this sport, which was their chief delight in life. Some, as they waved their hands in the excitement of their story, revealed fingers amputated by an explosion of their guns; others had cheeks furrowed by the scar of a powder flash. The oldest of them, the veterans, suffered from rheumatism as a result of a youth spent in exposure to all sorts of weather, but during the great hunting holidays they could not remain quiet at home, and they came, in spite of their ailments, to complain of the awkwardness of the new hunters.

The meeting broke up. The boatmen arrived with the announcement that supper was ready, and the men left in groups, entering the various illuminated cabins whose

red open doorways stood out above the mud soil. The air was filled with the strong smell of alcohol. The hunters were afraid of the water of the Albufera; they could not drink the lake water, as the natives did, fearing the fevers; so they brought along a considerable supply of absinthe and rum, which, on being uncorked, saturated the atmosphere with pungent aromas.

Tonet, seeing Saler so full of animation, as if an army were encamped there, recalled his grandfather's tales: the orgies formerly organized by the rich huntsmen of the city, with women who ran about naked, pursued by the dogs; the fortunes that had been lost in the cabins during long nights of gambling, between one hunt and another: all the stupid pleasures of a bourgeoisie that had got rich quickly, and which, finding itself far from its families, in an almost savage spot, excited by the sight of blood and the smell of powder, felt reborn in its bosom the primal human bestiality.

Tío Paloma sought out his grandson to introduce him to the huntsman he was to guide. The latter was a stout fellow, of good-natured, peaceful appearance; an industrial business man of the city who, after a life of toil, thought that the time had come for him to amuse himself like the rich folk, and was aping the pleasures of his new friends. He seemed to be uncomfortable and scared with his terrifying outfit: the hunting bags, the gun, the high boots,—all of them new and recently purchased,—troubled him exceedingly. But as his glance fell upon the cartridge-belt that crossed his chest like a bandoleer, he smiled beneath his huge felt hat, considering himself the image of one of those Boer heroes whose pictures he

admired in the newspapers. This was the first time he was hunting on the lake, and he trusted to his boatman's experience to choose his site when his number came around.

The three supped in a cabin together with other hunters. At such meals as these the table was very noisy. Rum was poured out by the tumblers-full, and around the table, like hungry dogs, would gather the towns-people, laughing at the gentlemen's jokes, accepting whatever was offered, and one alone drinking up what the hunters considered plenty for all.

Tonet scarcely ate, hearing as in a dream the shouts and laughter of these people, and the guffaw of protests that greeted the pretended exploits of the bragging huntsmen. He was thinking of Neleta; he could see her, in his mind's eye, crouching with pain in the upper story of the tavern, rolling over the floor, stifling her cries, without being able to scream for relief from her suffering.

Outside came the ringing of the bell on the roof of the *Demaná,* with the quivering notes of a hermitage bell.

"Two," said Tío Paloma, counting strokes with close attention, more fearful of arriving late at the *demaná* than of missing a mass.

When the bell sounded for the third time, hunters and boatmen left the table, all hastening to the place where the posts were to be allotted.

The light of the lantern had been added to by that of two lamps placed upon the platform table. Behind the railing were the lessees of the Albufera, and behind them, reaching to the back wall, were the hunters who were perpetual subscribers to the lake, and who occupied this

position in their own right. On the other side of the grating, filling the doorway and overflowing into the street, were the boatmen, the poor hunters, and the train of lesser folk that flocked to all the drawings. A stench of moist cloaks, of mud-stained trousers, of brandy and bad tobacco rose from the folk that pressed against the grating. The waterproof blouses of the huntsmen brushed against the bodies of their neighbors with a creak that set one's teeth on edge. Through the large shadowy frame of the open door could be seen like indecisive forms the white walls of the nearby cabins.

Despite this large gathering there was no disturbance of the silence that seemed to dominate everyone as soon as the threshold was crossed. One could note the same mute anxiety that reigns in court-rooms when the fate of a man hangs in the balance, or at drawings when fortunes are decided. If anyone spoke it was in a soft voice, in a timid whisper, as if in a sick room.

The principal lessee arose:

"*Caballers*. . . . Gentlemen. . . ."

The silence became deeper still. They were about to proceed to the claiming of places.

At each side of the table, as rigid as heralds of the lake's authority, stood the two oldest guards of the Albufera: two slim men, swarthy, of undulating gesture and aquiline countenance; two eels dressed in smocks, who seemed to dwell at the bottom of the lake and to appear only during the great, solemn hunt functions.

A guard read the list to know whether all the places would be occupied in the following day's hunt.

"One! . . . Two! . . ."

They went in turn, according to the size of the annual

fee and to age. The boatmen, on hearing the number of their employers called, would answer for them:

"Here! Present!"

After the roll-call came the solemn moment, the *demaná,* the naming of the site which every boatman, in agreement with the huntsman or at his own discretion as being more experienced, chose for the hunt.

"Three!" said one of the guards.

And at once the holder of that number uttered the name he had prepared. "The Lord's bush. . . ." "The rotten hulk" . . . . "The corner of Antina." And thus they continued to name the locations of the Albufera's whimsical geography; places christened by the taste of the boatmen; many of the titles were of a kind that could not be repeated before women, or which would turn one's stomach were they named at table; yet despite this, they were pronounced at this function with the utmost solemnity, causing not the trace of a smile.

The second guard, who had a voice like a trumpet, on hearing the sites named by the boatmen would raise his head, and with his eyes shut and his hands resting upon the railing, would shout at the top of his lungs, with a head-splitting cry that spread broadcast over the silence of the night:

"Three goes to the Lord's bush. . . . Four goes to the corner of San Ròch. . . . Five to the —— of the barber."

The designation of the posts lasted almost an hour, and while the guards were leisurely singing the assignments, a boy wrote them down in a large book upon the table.

After the assignments were over, licenses were issued to the lesser folk for hunting about at random: privileges that cost only two *duros* and that permitted the farmers

to sail about the entire lake of Albufera, at a certain distance from the regular assignments, killing the birds that escaped the fire of the wealthy.

The chief huntsmen separated with hearty handshakes. Some wished to sleep in Saler so that they could go to their places as soon as day broke; others, more spirited still, left at once for the lake, desirous of seeing for themselves the installation of the huge tank in which they were to spend the day. *"Vaya! . . . . bòna sòrt y divertirse!* So long! . . . . Good luck and a fine time!" And each one called to his boatman to make sure that nothing had been overlooked.

Tonet by this time was out of Saler. During the silence of the ceremony he had been seized with a great anxiety. Before his eyes rose the vision of Neleta writhing in her agony, alone yonder in Palmar, rolling on the floor, without a soul to help her or console her, threatened by the vigilance of her enemies.

He could not resist his anxiety and left the house of the *Demaná,* intending to return at once to Palmar, even if it should mean a break with his grandfather. Near the house named The Royal Children, where the tavern now was, he heard his name called. It was Sangonera. He was hungry and thirsty; he had hovered about the tables of the wealthy huntsmen without receiving the merest scrap: the boatmen had eaten everything.

Tonet thought of sending the vagabond as his substitute; but the son of the lake was surprised that anyone should suggest sailing a boat to him; it astonished him more than if the vicar of Palmar were to ask him to deliver the Sunday sermon. He wasn't made for that; besides, he didn't care to row for anybody. And Tonet

knew his opinion of the matter: work was an invention of the devil.

But Tonet, impatient and anxious, was in no mood to listen to Sangonera's silly talk. No refusals, or he would still the tramp's hunger and thirst by kicking him into the canal. Friends are meant for saving each other from such plights as his. He could row somebody else's skiff well enough when he went to sink his claws into the nets of the *redolís,* stealing the eels! Besides, if he were hungry, he could replenish himself as never before with the provisions that this gentleman had brought from Valencia. Seeing that Sangonera hesitated now, attracted by the prospects of a sated appetite, he decided the vagabond with several powerful shoves, dragging him to the boat of the hunter and explaining all the preparations. When the huntsman should come, he could tell him that the other man had fallen ill and had sought him out as substitute.

Before the distracted Sangonera had finished staggering, Tonet had already jumped into his light skiff and begun his trip, rowing like a madman.

It was a long voyage ahead of him. He had to cross the whole lake of Albufera to get to Palmar, and no wind was blowing. But Tonet was spurred on by fear, by uncertainty, and his boat shot like a shuttle over the dark tissue of the waters, which were dotted by the reflections of the stars.

It was past midnight when he arrived at Palmar. He was exhausted, his arms were broken by the desperate voyage, and he hoped to find the tavern quiet so that he could fall like a log into bed. As he moored his boat before the house, he saw that it was shut and quiet, like all

the other houses of the town, but the grating of the doors stood out against a reddish light.

Neleta's aunt opened the door and as she recognized him she cautioned him with a gesture, indicating with the corners of her eyes several men seated before the fireplace. They were farmers from Sueca who had come to the celebration: old customers who owned fields near Saler and who could not be refused accommodations without arousing suspicions. They had supped in the tavern and were slumbering by the fire, so that they might get into their boats an hour before daybreak and sail about the lake, waiting for the birds that escaped the better sites unharmed.

Tonet greeted them all, and after exchanging a few words about the celebration of the next day he went up to Neleta's bedroom.

She was in her chemise, pale, her features distorted, pressing her loins with both hands, a mad light in her eyes. Her pain had caused her to banish all prudence, and she was uttering shrieks that frightened her aunt.

"They'll hear you!" the old woman cried.

Neleta, conquering her agony, thrust her fists into her mouth or bit her bedclothes to choke back her groans.

Following her advice, Tonet went down to the tavern. He could do nothing by remaining upstairs. By keeping the men company, on the other hand, and engaging their attention with his conversation, he might prevent them from hearing anything that would rouse their suspicions.

More than an hour Tonet spent warming himself by the embers of the fireplace, speaking with the farmers about the past harvest, and the fine hunting there was going to be. There was a momentary lull in the conversation.

All at once there was heard a piercing, savage cry: a shriek like that of a person being assassinated. But Tonet's calm manner tranquillized them.

"The owner isn't feeling very well," he said.

And they continued their talk, without paying any attention to the hurried steps of the old woman above, as she hurried about making the ceiling shake. After a half-hour, when Tonet imagined that they had all forgotten the incident, he went up to the bedroom again. Some of the men's heads were wavering, overcome by sleep.

Neleta was stretched out in bed, white, pale, motionless, with no other signs of life than the gleam of her eyes.

"Tonet. . . . Tonet!" she said, feebly.

Her lover could guess from her voice and her glance what she wished to say to him. It was an order, an inflexible command. The fierce determination that had so awed Tonet now reappeared despite the weakness following upon the overwhelming crisis.

Neleta spoke slowly, with a voice as weak as a distant sigh. The hardest part was already past: now it was his turn. Let it be seen whether he would have the necessary courage.

The aunt, trembling, confused, without realizing what she was doing, gave Tonet a package of clothes, within which writhed a tiny being, filthy, ill-smelling, its flesh livid.

Neleta, beholding the newly born child near her, made a gesture of terror. She did not wish to see it: she feared to gaze upon it! She was afraid of herself, certain that if for an instant she looked at the child, the mother within her would be born anew and she would lack the courage to let them carry it away.

"Tonet! . . . At once! . . . Take it away!"

The Cubano gave his instructions rapidly to the old woman and he went down to take leave of the farmers, who were already asleep. Outside, at the rear, facing the canal, the old woman handed him the living bundle through a window on the lower floor.

When the window closed and Tonet was left alone in the darkness of the night, he suddenly felt all his courage leave him. The bundle of clothes and of soft flesh that he bore under his arm filled him with fear. It seemed that all at once a strange nervousness had arisen in him that sharpened all his senses. He could hear every noise in the town, even the most insignificant sounds, and it seemed to him that the stars were taking on a red hue. The wind swayed a dwarf olive near the tavern, and the rustling of the leaves made Tonet run, as if everybody in town had awakened and were approaching him, asking him what he was carrying under his arm. He imagined that La Samaruca and her relatives, alarmed by Neleta's absence during the day, had been hovering about the tavern as formerly, and that the wild witch would appear at any moment on the canal bank. What a scandal if anyone surprised him with that bundle! . . . What despair would not Neleta feel! . . .

He put the bundle of clothes quickly into the bottom of his boat; a desperate, furious wailing began to come from it, and seizing the pole he worked down the canal with mad swiftness. He poled wildly, as if goaded on by the cries of the newborn child and fearing that he would see the windows of the houses lighted up, and the shadows of the curious would ask him where he was going.

Soon he left behind him the silent dwellings of Palmar and entered the lake proper.

The calm of the waters, the darkness of a quiet, starry night seemed to infuse new courage into him. Above, the dark blue of the sky; below, the whitish blue of the water, stirred by mysterious ripples that made the reflections of the stars dance in its depths. The birds chirped in the reed grass and the water purled with the plashing of fishes in pursuit of each other. From time to time the furious crying of the newborn infant was mingled with these sounds.

Tonet, wearied by that night of continuous traveling, continued to pole along, sending the boat in the direction of Saler. His body was numb with fatigue; but his mind, wide awake and sharpened by the presence of danger, worked far more actively than his arms.

He was already some distance from Palmar, but it was still more than an hour's journey to Saler. From there to the city meant another two long hours of travel. Tonet looked at the sky: it must be about three. Before two hours it would be dawn and the sun would already be on the horizon when he arrived at Valencia. Besides, he thought with terror of the long walk through the outskirts of Ruzafa, always so closely watched by the civil guard,—of the entrance into the city, in full gaze of the excise officials, who would want to examine the package he was carrying under his arm,—of the folk who rose before dawn and would meet him on the road and recognize him. And that scandalous, desperate wailing that grew stronger every moment and constituted a danger even in the solitude of the Albufera! . . .

Tonet beheld before him an endless road, infinite, and he felt his strength abandon him. He would never reach the streets of the city, which were deserted at dawn,—the portals of the church, where infants were abandoned like a troublesome burden. It was easy enough in Palmar, in the silence of the bedroom, to say: "Tonet, do this and that." But after setting out, reality loomed large with its insuperable obstacles.

Even on the lake the danger grew momentarily greater. On other nights he might have sailed from one shore to the other without meeting anybody, but on this night the Albufera was densely populated. In each *mata,* in every direction there was noted the work of invisible men, preparing for the hunt.

An entire town went to and fro in the black boats. In the silence of the Albufera, which transmitted sounds across a vast distance, one could hear the mauls hammering in the stakes at the huntsmens' positions, and the bunches of burning plants by the light of which the boatmen were concluding their preparations burned on the surface of the waters like red stars. How could he continue on his way among people that knew him, accompanied by the squalling of the baby, a wailing that was incomprehensible on the lake? He passed a boat at a distance, but within hailing distance. Doubtless the occupants had wondered where the strange wailing was coming from.

"Comrade," shouted a distant voice, "what are you carrying there?"

Tonet made no reply, but he felt that all strength to continue the voyage had left him; he sat down at one end of the boat, laying the pole aside. He would like to stay there, even if dawn overtook him. He was afraid to

go on, and gave himself up to the languor of the straggler who sinks to the ground, knowing that he is to die. He saw clearly that he lacked the resolution to fulfil his promise. Let them surprise him, let everybody know what had happened, let Neleta lose her legacy! . . . He was at the end of his rope!

But scarcely had he adopted this desperate resolution, than an idea began to glimmer in his brain, seeming to burn him with its contact. At first it was a spark, then a red-hot coal, then a flame, until at last it burst into a terrible conflagration that swelled his head, threatening to make it explode, while a cold sweat distilled on his forehead as if it were the steam of this boiling idea.

Why proceed any farther? . . . Neleta's wish was to have this evidence of her sin disappear, so that she should not lose any part of her fortune; to abandon it, since its presence could compromise the peace of them both, and for such a purpose there was no place like the lake of Albufera, whose waters had often concealed men who were being sought by justice, rescuing them from ever-vigilant pursuit.

He shuddered at the thought that the lake would not preserve the existence of that feeble, newborn little body; but was the life of the infant any better assured if he should abandon it in some city lane? "The dead do not return to compromise the living." And Tonet, thinking this thought, felt revive within him the hardness of the old Palomas, the cruelty of his grandfather, who had seen his children die without a tear, with the egotistic thought that death is a boon in the poor man's family, since it leaves more bread for those who survive.

During a lucid interval, Tonet grew ashamed of his

wickedness, of the indifference with which he considered the death of the being at his feet, and which was now silent, as if exhausted by its furious wailing. He had looked at it for an instant, yet the sight of it produced no emotion in him. He recalled its livid face, its pointed cranium, its bulging eyes, its huge mouth, which contracted, spreading from ear to ear. A ridiculous toad's head that had left him cold, unmoved by the feeblest sentiment. And yet this was his son! . . .

In order to explain this coldness to himself, Tonet recalled what he had often heard his grandfather say. Only mothers feel an instinctive, deep tenderness for their children from the moment of birth. The fathers do not at once love them: time must pass, and only when the little one grows up do they feel any affection arise through continuous association,—a reflective, serious affection.

He thought of Neleta's fortune, of the integrity of that heritage which he considered his own. His harsh feelings, those of the lazy fellow who beholds the problem of existence solved forever were aroused, and his egoism asked itself whether it were prudent to compromise such good fortune for the sake of preserving the life of a tiny, ugly creature, just like all the other newborn babes, who didn't rouse the slightest emotion in him.

His disappearance would work no evil upon the parents; and if he lived, they would have to surrender to hateful persons half the bread that they carried to their mouths. Tonet, confusing cruelty and bravery, with that blindness characteristic of criminals, reproaching himself for his indecision, which held him as if nailed to the stern, letting time fly.

The darkness became gradually less dense. Day was

approaching. Across the gray sky of dawn there passed, like trickling drops of ink, a few flocks of birds. In the distance, off toward Saler, sounded the first shots. The infant began to whine, suffering from hunger and the cold of the morning.

"Hey, Cubano! . . . Is that you?"

Tonet thought he could hear this greeting from a distant boat.

Fear of being recognized caused him to jump to his feet and seize the pole. His eyes gleamed with a strange spark, similar to that which at times illuminated Neleta's green glance.

He shot his boat in among the reed grass, following the tortuous lanes of water that opened through the reeds. He pushed along at hazard, going from one clump to another, redoubling his efforts as if he were being pursued. The prow of the boat cleft the grasses, breaking them. The tall reed grass opened to make way for the skiff, and the mad thrusts of the pole sent him gliding almost on to dry land, upon the dense roots of the reeds which formed thick meshes.

He fled without knowing from whom, as if his criminal thoughts were rowing directly behind in pursuit. Several times he bent over, stretching a hand toward that bundle of clothes from which the furious crying came, and at once withdrew it. But as the boat became snagged among some roots, the wretched fellow, as if he wished to relieve the boat of an immense burden, seized the bundle and threw it with all his might over his head as far as he could into the reeds that surrounded him.

The bundle disappeared amid a creaking of broken reeds. For an instant the clothes in which it was wrapped

fluttered in the gloom of the dawn, like the wings of a white bird that had fallen in the mysterious depths of the waters.

Once again the wretch felt the necessity of flight, as if someone were close at his heels. He poled the boat desperately through the sedge until he struck a channel of water; he followed it in all its windings among the high bushes, and as he entered the lake of Albufera proper, with his boat free of all burdens, he breathed with relief, contemplating the blue rim of the dawn.

Then he stretched himself out in the bottom of the boat and slept that profound sleep of the dead which follows upon great nervous crises and almost always follows on the heel of committing a crime.

## IX

THE day began with many disappointments for the hunter confided to the skill and experience of Sangonera.

Before daybreak, as he was fastening his shelter, the prudent bourgeois was compelled to beg the help of some boatmen, who had a good laugh when they saw the vagabond's new occupation.

With the agility of long habit they drove three stakes into the muddy bottom of the Albufera and placed upon them the huge compartment that was to serve as the hunter's refuge. Afterwards they surrounded the place with reeds so as to deceive the birds into approaching the spot in all confidence, taking it for a clump in the middle of the lake. In order to increase this deception, some *bots* floated about the scene: a few dozen decoy ducks and coots, made of cork, which, with the undulations of the lake, moved about on the surface. From a distance they looked like a flock of birds floating peacefully near the reeds.

Sangonera, quite content to have spared himself all this work, invited his employer to take up his position. He would row off in the boat at a certain distance, so as not to frighten away the game, and when the employer had shot a few coots, all he had to do was shout, and the assistant would quickly gather them from the water.

"So long! . . . . Good luck, Don Joaquín!"

The tramp spoke so humbly and showed such eagerness to be of help, that the good huntsman felt all vexation at previous derelictions disappear. Very well: he would call as soon as he should shoot a bird. And lest the assistant should feel bored while waiting, he might take a bite from the provisions in the boat. His wife had provided him with as great abundance as if he were to make a tour around the world.

He indicated three carefully covered, huge pots, and in addition, loaves of bread, a basket of fruit and a large wine-skin. Sangonera's face was excited at beholding such a treasure-house confided to his care, after it had been tempting him in the prow all night long. Tonet had not deceived him when he had spoken of the customer's generosity. Thanks, Don Joaquín! Since he was so good and invited him to have a bite, he would permit himself a little nibble, to pass the time. Just a snack; nothing more.

And rowing away from the post, he took up a position within hearing distance of the hunter, afterward stretching out on the bottom of the boat.

It was now day and the shots resounded all over the Albufera country, magnified by the echoes around the lake. No sooner would a flock of birds be sighted against the gray sky than they would raise flight, scared by the thunder of the discharges. And no sooner did they descend somewhat in their rapid flight, in search of the water, than at once a shower of lead would fall around them.

When Don Joaquín was left alone in his place he could not help feeling a slight fear. Here he was, all alone in the middle of the Albufera, inside of a heavy barrel, with

no support other than a few stakes, and he feared to stir, lest the entire aquatic catafalque go toppling down with him, burying him in the mire. The water, with gentle undulations, came lapping against the edge of the wood, about at the height of the hunter's chin, and its continuous *chap-chap* made him shudder. If this contrivance should sink, thought Don Joaquín, no matter how soon the boatman would arrive, he would be at the bottom, with all the weight of his gun, his cartridges and those huge boots that pinched him so atrociously, sunken in the rice straw with which the barrel was stuffed. His legs were burning, while his hands were chilled by the cool of dawn and the glacial cold of the gun. And this was what folk called having a good time? . . . . He began to find little diversion in so costly a pleasure.

And the birds? Where were those birds that his companions were hunting by the dozen? There was a moment in which he had impetuously whirled about in his revolving seat, raising his gun to his cheek with trembling emotion. There they were! . . . They were floating nonchalantly about the post. While he had been day-dreaming, almost put to sleep by the coldness of dawn, they had arrived by the dozens, fleeing the distant shots, and were swimming close to him with the confidence inspired by a haven of refuge. All he had to do was aim blindly! . . . Sure game! But as he was about to fire, he recognized the decoys,—the whole flock of cork birds that he had forgotten, because of his inexperience. He lowered his gun and looked around, fearful of discovering the jesting eyes of his friends in the solitude.

His hopes revived. What the deuce were those hunters shooting at that their guns unceasingly disrupted the

calm of the lake? . . . Shortly after sunrise Don Joaquín was at last able to discharge his virgin weapon. Three birds flew by almost on a level with the water. The novice huntsman fired at them tremblingly. They looked like huge, monstrous birds to him,—veritable eagles,—magnified by his nervousness. The first shot merely made them fly the harder, but at once the second rang out, and the coot, folding its wings, fell after several somersaults and remained motionless on the water.

Don Joaquín jumped up with such a bound that he made his shooting-blind tremble. At that moment he considered himself superior to every other man in creation: he admired himself, having discovered within him a heroic prowess that he had never suspected.

"Sangonera! . . . . Boatman!" he shouted in a voice tremulous with emotion. "There's one! . . . We've got one already!"

He was answered by an almost unintelligible grunt: a full, stuffed mouth, that could scarcely allow room for the words to come out. . . . All right! He'd come and gather them when there'd be a few more.

The hunter, well content with his exploit, hid himself anew behind the curtain of reed grass, certain that he alone could bring down every bird that flew over the lake. All morning long he spent shooting, and the intoxication of the powder, the pleasure of destruction, grew upon him. He shot in this direction and that, without regard to distances, greeting with his gun every bird that came into sight, even though it were flying near the clouds. Christ! This was sport indeed! And in these blind discharges he would at times hit some unfortunate birds, who would fall, fated to be the victims of an unskilled hand,

after having escaped the guns of more expert huntsmen unharmed.

In the meantime Sangonera remained invisible, at the bottom of the boat. What a day, by God! The archbishop of Valencia couldn't be having a better time of it than he in that skiff, seated upon the straw, with a slice of bread in his hand and a pot pressed between his knees. Let nobody speak to him of the abundance in Cañamèl's place! That was mere poverty and pretense that could dazzle only the eyes of the poor! Leave it to the city gentlemen to treat themselves well! . . .

He had begun by passing in review the three pots, which were carefully covered by thick cloths fastened around the rim. Which should be first? . . . He chose at random, and as he opened it his nose dilated voluptuously with the perfume of cod and tomato. That was cooking for you! The cod was floating in the red juicy tomato, so gently, so appetizingly, that when Sangonera swallowed his first mouthful it seemed that a sweeter nectar was flowing down his gullet than the draught in the wine-vessels which had tempted him so sorely during his days as a sacristan. This was enough! No need of going any farther. He wished to respect the mystery of the other two pots; not to banish the illusions aroused by their sealed mouths, behind which he divined the presence of great surprise. Now to get down to business! And placing the odorous pot between his legs, he began to gulp down the contents in wise peacefulness, as one who had the whole day before him and knew that there would be plenty to occupy him. He ate so slowly, but with such skill, that when he introduced his hunk of bread into the vessel of wine, the level of the liquid would lower consid-

erably. The enormous chunk would fill his mouth and swell his cheeks. His jaws would grind away powerfully, with the regularity of a mill-wheel, and in the meantime his eyes would be fixed upon the pot, exploring its depths, calculating the number of trips that his hand would yet have to make before the entire contents had been transported to his mouth.

From time to time he would rouse himself from this contemplation. Christ! An honest, hard-working man must not forget his obligations amidst his pleasures. He looked out of the boat, and seeing the birds approach he would shout his directions:

"Don Joaquín! Over toward Palmar! . . . Don Joaquín! Over toward Saler!"

After indicating to the huntsman the direction from which the birds were coming, he would feel fatigued with such ardent effort, and would grasp the wine-bag firmly, renewing his mute dialogue with the pot.

His employer had brought down some three *fòches,* when Sangonera laid aside the almost empty pot. At the bottom, stuck to the earthenware walls, there remained a few stray bits of food. The tramp felt the call of his conscience. What was going to be left for his employer if he ate everything? He must be content with a bite, and no more. And placing the pot beneath the prow, carefully covered, he was impelled by his curiosity to open the second.

Good God in heaven, what a surprise! Pork loin, choice pork sausages stuffed with the best; all cold, but with an appetizing, meaty odor that inspired the vagabond. How long past it was since his stomach, habituated to the white, tasteless meat of the eels, had enjoyed the

solidity of the good dishes that were made in the inland town! . . . Sangonera told himself sagely that it would be a mark of great disrespect toward his employer to scorn that second pot. It would be tantamount to declaring that he, a vagrant starveling, refused to surrender to the excellent dishes prepared in Don Joaquín's home. Surely the huntsman would not get angry over one morsel more or less.

And once again he made himself comfortable at the bottom of the boat, with his legs crossed and the pot snug between them. Sangonera quivered with voluptuous pleasure as he swallowed these morsels: he closed his eyes, the better to appreciate their slow descent into his stomach. What a day, Lord, what a great day! . . . It seemed that he was only now beginning to eat, for the first time that morning. Now he looked disdainfully at the first pot, cast under the prow. That had been all very well as an amusement, to deceive his stomach and give his jaws a little fun. But this was the real thing; blood pudding, pork sausage, the appetizing pork loin that melted between his teeth, leaving such a taste that his mouth sought another slice, and yet another, never having enough.

Noting the ease with which the second pot had been emptied, Sangonera was filled with a desire to help his employer, fulfilling his duties most minutely, and while he still kept his jaws going, he looked in every direction, uttering cries that seemed roars:

"Over there toward Saler! . . . . Yonder near Palmar!"

Lest a stopper should form in his throat, he gave little rest to the wine-skin. He drank and drank that wine, which was much better than Neleta's; and the red liquor seemed to excite his appetite, opening new chasms in his

bottomless stomach. His eyes burned with the fires of a happy intoxication; his face took on a violet hue, and noisy belching shook him from head to foot. With a happy smile he tapped his swollen stomach.

"Well, how's the boy? How do you feel down there, hey?" he asked his stomach, as if it were a friend, patting it affectionately.

And his intoxication became sweeter than ever before: the intoxication of the well-fed man who drinks on a full stomach: not the sad, lugubrious guzzling he was wont to do on an empty stomach, pouring glass after glass into it at the expense of the men he found on the banks of the lake,—fellows who always invited him to drink, but who never offered him a crust of bread.

He gave himself up to this smiling spree, without on that account ceasing to eat. The Albufera looked a rosy hue to him. The sky, of luminous blue, seemed to be parted in a smile such as once had caressed him on the road of the Dehesa. The only dark object before him now, with all the lugubriousness of a tomb, was the pot that he held pressed between his knees. He had emptied it of its contents. Not a trace was left of the meal.

For a moment he paused as if terrified by his own voracity. But soon his immense appetite struck him funny, and in order to drown out his remorse, he took a long drink from the wine-bag.

He laughed uproariously at thought of what folks would say in Palmar when they learned of his exploit, and eager to finish the job, sampling everything Don Joaquín had brought with him, he uncovered the third pot.

Lord! Two stuffed capons between those clay walls, their skins golden and tastefully greasy: two adorable

creatures of the Lord, headless, with their thighs fastened to their bodies by thread wound around them and their breasts as prominent and white as those of a maiden. If he didn't lay hands upon this, he was no man! Even if Don Joaquín sent a bullet through him! . . . How long it was since he had feasted upon such dainties! He hadn't eaten meat since the time he had served as Tonet's dog, when they had poached in the Dehesa. But as he thought of the hard, thready meat of the lake fowl, his pleasure at devouring the white meat of the capons, the golden skin, which crunched between his teeth as the juice ran down the corners of his lips, increased enormously.

He ate like an automaton, eagerly bent upon swallowing, swallowing everything in sight, gazing anxiously into the bottom of the pot, as if he were eating on a bet.

From time to time he would be seized with childish whims: the caprices of a drunkard,—to raise a racket and play pranks. He grabbed apples from the fruit-basket and threw them at the birds that were flying far away, as if he could hit them.

He was filled with great tenderness and affection toward Don Joaquín, in return for the happiness he had given him; he wished that the man were close by, that he might embrace him; he addressed him familiarly, with calm insolence, and although not a bird could be seen against the horizon, he blared out in endless roars:

"Chimo! Chimo! . . . Fire. . . . there they come!"

In vain did the huntsman turn about and stare in every direction. Not a bird was to be seen. What did that madman want? He ought rather to get busy gathering the dead coots that were floating about the place. But Sangonera again crouched at the bottom of the boat, not

stirring to obey orders. He'd come over later! He preferred to have his employer kill a great many birds first! . . . In his eagerness to sample everything he now began to uncork the bottles, soon tasting rum and pure absinthe, while the lake of Albufera began to grow dark in full sunlight, and his legs seemed to be nailed to the boards of the boat, utterly lacking strength to stir.

At noon, Don Joaquín, hungry and wishing to leave that barrel compartment which had compelled him to stand motionless for so long, called to his boatman. In vain did his voice echo amid the silence.

*"Sangonera! . . . Sangonera!"*

The tramp, his head thrust above the gunwale, was looking at him fixedly, repeating that he was coming directly: but he remained motionless, as if nobody were calling him. When the hunter, red with so much shouting, threatened to shoot him, he made an extraordinary effort, staggered to his feet, looked all over the boat for the pole, though it lay at his very hands, and at last began slowly to draw near.

Don Joaquín jumped into the skiff and stretched his legs, which had become swollen with so many hours of rigid watching. The boatman, at his orders, began to gather the dead birds: but he did so gropingly, as if he could not see them, casting his body over the gunwale so violently that more than once he would have fallen into the water were it not for his employer.

"You cursed scoundrel!" exclaimed the hunter. "Are you drunk?"

Very soon he beheld the explanation, as he examined his provisions before Sangonera's stupid gaze. The pots empty; the wine-bag wrinkled and hollow; the bottles

open; only a few crumbs of bread, and the fruit-basket might have been turned upside down above the lake without fear of anything dropping out!

Don Joaquín's first impulse was to strike his boatman with the butt of the gun, but his initial rage having blown over, he contemplated the scene with amazement. Had this fellow done all this havoc unaided? . . . That was a fine way of taking a bite! Where had he put it all? . . . Could a human stomach contain so much? . . .

But Sangonera, listening to the infuriated hunter call him scoundrel and shameless wretch, could only answer in a whining voice:

"Oh, Don Joaquín! . . . I'm sick! Awful sick! . . ."

He was indeed sick. All one had to do was look at his yellowish face, at his eyes which struggled in vain to keep open, his legs that could not stand straight.

The huntsman, in a rage, was about to strike Sangonera, when the latter fell to the bottom of the boat, his nails grasping his sash as if he wished to open his stomach. He rolled into a ball, with painful convulsions that contracted his countenance, while his eyes turned glassy.

He groaned and at the same time writhed in agonizing contortions, struggling to cast forth from his body the prodigious amount of food he had eaten, which seemed to choke him with its weight.

The hunter did not know what to do, and once again he was sorry that he had come to the Albufera. After a half-hour of oaths, just when he had made up his mind that he would have to take the pole himself and make his own way back to Saler as best he could, several farmers who were hunting in the vicinity took pity on him.

They recognized Sangonera and guessed his trouble.

This was a case of gluttony that spelled death. The tramp was fated to meet such an end.

Moved by that fraternal spirit of country people which impels them to lend aid even to the most humble, they placed Sangonera in their boat and carried him off to Palmar, while one of them remained with the hunter, content to serve him as boatman in exchange for the privilege of using his gun.

At mid-afternoon the women of Palmar saw the vagabond fall upon the canal bank, as inert as a bale.

"Rogue! . . . Some drunken spree!" they all cried.

But the kind men who had done him the charity of bearing him aloft like a corpse to his wretched hovel, shook their heads sadly. It was not drunkenness alone, and if the vagrant ever escaped this attack, then he had a dog's hide indeed. They told the tale of that prodigious feast which had now placed him at death's door, and the people of Palmar laughed with astonishment, proud that one of their own should have such a fabulous stomach.

Poor Sangonera. The news of his illness circulated all over town, and the women came in groups to his door, daring to look into this cave which formerly all had avoided. Sangonera, stretched out in the straw, his glassy eyes fixed upon the roof and his face the color of wax, lay quivering, roaring with pain, as if his entrails were being torn out.

"How do you feel, Sangonera?" they asked from the door.

And the sick man answered with a painful groan, changing his position so as to turn his back upon them, vexed by the town's visitation.

Other women, more courageous than their sisters, en-

tered the shanty and knelt beside him, feeling his abdomen and asking where it hurt him. They discussed among themselves all the appropriate remedies they knew, recalling those that had been effective in their own family experience. Then they sought out certain hags to whom many cures had been credited, and who enjoyed more respect than the poor doctor of Palmar. From mysterious hiding-places in their cabins they brought forth herb poultices, while others came with a pot of hot water, asking the sick man to swallow it at a gulp. Their opinion was unanimous. The poor fellow's meal had stopped at the entrance to his stomach, and it must be *loosened*. . . . Lord, what a pitiable fellow! His father had died of a spree, and there was he now, stretched out by a gluttonous orgy! What a family!

Nothing so revealed to Sangonera the seriousness of his condition as the solicitude of the women. He mirrored himself in the commiseration of these folk as in a looking-glass, and he realized his danger when he saw himself attended to by the selfsame women who on the previous day were poking fun at him, scolding their husbands and children if they found them in his company.

"The poor fellow! The poor fellow!" they all murmured.

And with that courage of which only woman is capable in the face of misfortune, they surrounded him. They knew very well what this was: he had a *knot* in his bowels; and with maternal caresses they got him to open his jaws, which were compressed with pain, inducing him to swallow every manner of miraculous liquid, which very soon he vomited back.

At nightfall they left him. They had to cook supper

at home, and the sick man remained alone in his hut, motionless beneath the reddish light of a barn-lantern that the women had stuck in a crevice. The town dogs thrust their noses in through the open door, and for a long time gazed out of their deep eyes at the sick man, afterward withdrawing with a mournful howl.

During the night it was the men who visited the cabin. At Cañamèl's tavern the matter was the general topic of conversation, and the boatmen, amazed at Sangonera's deed, wished to see him for the last time.

They entered the place with hesitant step, for the most of them were drunk as a result of having eaten with the hunters.

"Sangonera! . . . . Old boy! How are you?"

But at once they recoiled, repelled by the stench from the filth about him. Some of them, a little braver than the others, went so far as to jest with him in brutal irony, inviting him to drink his last glass at Cañamèl's tavern; but the sick man replied only with a weak groan, and closed his eyes, sinking anew into his stupor, which was interrupted by fits of trembling and vomiting. At midnight he was left alone.

Tonet did not wish to see his former companion. He had returned to the tavern, after a long sleep in the boat; a deep, brutish sleep, interrupted now and then by nightmares and accompanied by the lullaby of the hunters' shots, which reverberated in his brain like endless rolls of thunder.

On entering he was surprised to see Neleta seated before the casks, as pale as wax, but without the slightest uneasiness in her eyes, as if she had spent the night peacefully. Tonet was amazed at his sweetheart's courage.

They exchanged a look full of meaning, like wretches who are united more closely than ever by the bonds of complicity.

After a long pause, she dared to question him. She wished to know how he had carried out his errand. And he replied, with bowed head and averted eyes, as if the whole town were watching him. . . . Yes; he had left it in a safe place. Nobody would ever discover it.

After these words, which were exchanged very rapidly, the two remained in silence, pensive: she, behind the counter, he seated at the door, his back to Neleta, so as not to see her. They seemed overwhelmed, as if there weighed upon them an immense burden. They feared to speak to each other, for the sound of their voices seemed to arouse recollections of the previous night.

They had liberated themselves from their difficult pass: there was no more danger. Spirited Neleta was amazed at the ease with which the whole matter had been arranged. Weak and sick as she was, she still found the strength and spirit to remain in her place, so that nobody should suspect what had occurred during the night, and yet the lovers felt themselves suddenly estranged. Something between them had broken forever. The void that the little infant had left upon disappearing grew immensely, separating and isolating the two wretched plotters. They both thought that in the future they would have no greater intimacy than the glance they would exchange in remembrance of their great crime. And Tonet's disquietude grew even greater when he recalled that she did not know the real fate of the infant.

When night came the tavern was filled with boatmen and hunters returning from the lands of the Ribera, ex-

hibiting the bunches of birds they had caught, strung together through the beaks. A fine hunt! They all drank, commenting upon the fortune of various hunters and on Sangonera's beastly exploit. Tonet went from group to group, eager to take his mind off his thoughts, discussing and drinking at every table. His intention to forget in drunkenness made him drink continuously, with enforced gaiety, and his friends celebrated the Cubano's good humor. They had never seen him so merry.

Tío Paloma entered the tavern and his piercing eyes were fixed upon Neleta.

"Heavenly queen! . . . . How white! Are you sick? . . . ."

Neleta made vague reference to a headache that had kept her awake all night, while the old fellow blinked maliciously, connecting this bad night with the inexplicable flight of his grandson. He had made him ridiculous in the eyes of that Valencian gentleman. His conduct was unworthy of a boatman of the Albufera. For less reason he had cuffed more than one fellow in his prime. It could have occurred only to a wretch like him to convert Sangonera into a boatman, and as a result the tramp had gorged himself to death as soon as he was left alone.

Tonet proffered excuses. There was time for him to serve that gentleman. Within two weeks would come the feast of Santa Catalina, and Tonet would lend his services as boatman. Tío Paloma, his anger soothed by his grandson's explanation, said that he had already invited Don Joaquín to a hunt on the lake. He was to come the following week, and he and Tonet would be the man's boatmen. He must give these Valencian gentlemen satisfaction, so that the Albufera would always have plenty of

patronage. Otherwise, what was to become of the lake people?

That night Tonet got drunk, and instead of going up to Neleta's room he remained snoring before the fireplace. Neither sought the other. They shunned each other, finding a certain solace in their isolation. They feared that there would be revived the memory of that creature who had passed between them, the wail of a life which had been immediately stifled.

The next day Tonet got drunk again. He did not dare to be alone with his conscience: he needed to stultify himself with alcohol so as to keep it quiet and asleep.

New tidings about Sangonera's condition came to the tavern. He was in a hopeless condition, dying. The men had returned to their work and the women who entered the tramp's hovel recognized the futility of their cures. The oldest of them explained the illness in their own manner. The food stopper that shut the mouth of his stomach had rotted in him. All you had to do was look at his abdomen.

The doctor from Sollana arrived on one of his weekly visits, and they took him to Sangonera's shanty. The day-laborer of the profession shook his head negatively. There was nothing to do. It was a mortal appendicitis: the result of so extraordinary an abuse that it filled even the doctor with astonishment. And all over town the word appendicitis was repeated, the women finding fun in pronouncing a word that sounded so strange to them.

The vicar, Don Miguel, considered that the moment had arrived for entering this renegade's cabin. There was nobody like him for despatching folk promptly and frankly.

"Well!" he cried from the doorway. "Are you a Christian?"

Sangonera gazed at him in surprise. Was he a Christian? And as if scandalized by the question, he looked at the roof of his hovel, caressing with ecstasy and hope the patch of blue sky that could be seen through the rents.

Very well then; there was no need of beating around the bush with men, continued the vicar. He must confess himself, for he was going to die. . . . That was it exactly. This gun-carrying priest used no circumlocutions with his parishioners.

The vagabond's eyes flashed with an expression of terror. His existence, which had been so replete with misery, now appeared to him in all the charm of boundless freedom. He saw the lake with its shining waters; the Dehesa, murmurous amid its perfumed thickets, dotted with wild flowers, and even Cañamèl's counter, before which he had dreamed, seeing life in rosy hues through the wine glasses. . . . And he must leave all that! . . . The tears began to roll from his glassy eyes. There was no help for it: his hour of death had come. He would see more clearly in the next world that celestial smile of infinite compassion which had one night caressed him by the lake.

And with a sudden tranquillity, amid attacks of nausea and writhing, he confessed to the vicar in a low voice all the thefts he had committed against the fishermen,—so numerous that he could recall them only in bulk. Together with his sins he revealed his hopes: his faith in Jesus Christ, who would return to earth to save the poor; his mysterious meeting on a certain night by the shores of the lake. But the vicar rudely interrupted him:

"Sangonera, less of your stories. You're raving! . . . The truth . . . tell the truth."

He had already told the truth. All his sins had consisted in avoiding work, since he believed it contrary to the commandments of the Lord. Once he had resigned himself to being like the rest, and to lend his hand to man, placing himself in contact with wealth and comforts, and ay, he was paying for this inconsistency with his life!

All the women of Palmar were touched by the vagabond's end. After his flight from the church he had lived like a heretic, but he was dying like a Christian. His illness did not permit him to receive the Lord, and the vicar administered the last sacrament not without soiling his soutane.

There entered the cabin only certain brave old women who gave themselves up, through abnegation, to laying out all the village dead. The people spoke mysteriously and in terror of Sangonera's agony.

The sick man died on the third day, his stomach swollen, his face drawn, his hands contracted by suffering, and his mouth stretched from ear to ear by his final convulsions.

The wealthiest women of Palmar, who regularly visited the presbytery, felt a tender compassion for that unfortunate fellow who had been reconciled with the Lord after a dog's life. They wished him to set out on his last voyage in a worthy manner, and they took a trip to Valencia to purchase the necessary outfit, spending more money than Sangonera had ever seen in all his life.

They garbed him in a religious habit, inside of a white coffin rimmed with silver braid, and the entire vicinity passed by the vagabond's corpse.

His former companions rubbed their bleary eyes, repressing the laughter aroused by the sight of their crony so clean, in a special coffin, dressed like a friar. Even his death was something of a joke. Farewell, Sangonera! . . . No more would the *mornells* be emptied before the arrival of the owners; no longer would he bedeck himself with the flowers that grew on the banks, like a drunken pagan! He had lived free and happy, without the fatigue of labor, and even at his death he was wily enough to go off to the other world dressed like a wealthy man, at the expense of others.

At midnight they placed the coffin on the "eel cart," among the fishbaskets, and the sacristan of Palmar, together with three friends, took the corpse to the cemetery, pausing at every tavern on the road.

Tonet did not fully realize that his friend had died. He lived in a sort of darkness, continuously drinking, and the drunkenness made him deeply silent and uncommunicative. Fear restrained his talkativeness, for he was afraid of saying too much.

"Sangonera is dead! Your companion!" they told him in the tavern.

He replied with grunts, drinking and dozing off again, while the customers attributed his silence to the grief over his companion's death.

Neleta, white and sad, as if a spectre passed before her eyes at all hours, tried to keep her lover from drinking.

"Tonet, don't drink any more," she would say gently.

And she would be frightened at the rebellious gesture, the curbed anger with which the drunken fellow would reply. She understood that her rule over the man's will had vanished. Sometimes she would detect in his eye a

nascent hatred,—the animosity of the slave who has determined to rise against his former oppressor and do away with him.

He paid no attention to Neleta, and he filled his glass at every cask in the house. When sleep would surprise him, he would stretch out in any corner at all, and there he would lay as if dead, while Centella, with the tender instinct of dogs, would lick his face and his hands.

Tonet did not wish his thoughts to wake. As soon as his drunkenness commenced to evaporate, he would feel a painful restlessness. The shadows of those who came into the tavern, as they crossed the floor, would cause him to raise his head in alarm, as if he feared the appearance of someone who would disturb his dreams with the shudder of terror. He felt that he must at once get drunk again, and never wake from his stupor, which engulfed his soul and deadened all his feelings.

Through the veils in which drunkenness wrapped his thought, everything seemed distant, vague, confused. He imagined that many years had gone by since that night he had spent on the lake; the last night of his existence as a man, the first in a life of shadows, which he went through gropingly, his brain dulled and darkened by alcohol. The recollection of that night caused him to tremble as soon as he would find himself approaching soberness. Only when drunk could he bear that memory, beholding it dimly, like one of those distant shames whose recollection pains us less because it is lost in the haze of the past.

His grandfather came to surprise him in this sottish state. On the following day Tío Paloma expected Don Joaquín for a hunt on the lake. Would his grandson keep his word? Neleta insisted that he accept. He was

ill, he needed a change, he hadn't been out of the tavern for a week. The Cubano was attracted by the prospect of a day's activity. His hunting enthusiasm was revived. Was he going to dwell forever estranged from the lake?

He spent the day loading cartridges, cleaning Cañamèl's magnificent rifle; and as a result of this occupation he drank less. Centella frisked and bounded about him, barking with joy to behold the preparations.

On the following morning Tío Paloma came all ready, bringing Don Joaquín in his skiff, together with that gentleman's entire, gaudy hunting outfit.

The old man was impatient and hurried his grandson. He wished to stop only long enough for the gentleman to have a bite, and then off to the hunt. They must take full advantage of the morning.

In a little while they left: Tonet in front, with Centella in his skiff like a figurehead at the prow, and behind, Tío Paloma's boat, where Don Joaquín was examining with great admiration the old man's gun,—that famous weapon with so many repairs in it, of which so many deeds were recounted among the lake dwellers.

The two boats sailed into the lake of Albufera. Tonet, seeing that his grandfather was heading toward the left, asked where he was going. The old man was surprised at the question. They were going to the *Bolodró,* the largest *mata* near the town. In that spot there were more cocks and coots than anywhere else. Tonet wished to go farther out, toward the center of the lake. And a hot discussion arose between the two boatmen. But the old man's will finally prevailed, and Tonet was forced to follow him, shrugging his shoulders resignedly.

The two boatmen entered a narrow lane of water amid

the tall reed grass. Bulrushes grew in abundance amid the *senills;* the reeds and rushes blended, and the rambling plants, with their white and blue bells, twined around this aquatic vegetation, forming garlands. The confused network of roots gave an appearance of solidity to the dense reeds. At the bottom of the water could be seen strange vegetation that rose to the surface, and at times it could hardly be said whether the boats were sailing along or whether they were being drawn over verdant fields covered by a thin film of glass.

The silence of the morning was deep in this corner of the Albufera, which looked more wild than ever in the sunlight: from time to time a bird's shrill call would sound from the growth; there would be a bubbling noise in the water, revealing the presence of hidden creatures amid the slimy depths.

Don Joaquín prepared his gun, waiting for the birds to fly from one side to the other of the thick plantation.

"Tonet, take a turn about," ordered the old man.

And the Cubano poled vigorously, sending his skiff around the *mata,* stirring the reeds so as to frighten the birds into flying up over the plantation.

It took him more than ten minutes to sail around. When he had returned to his grandfather's side Don Joaquín had already fired at some birds, which, frightened by Tonet's maneuver, had risen in flight, changing quarters.

The coots looked out upon the part of the waters bare of reeds, which would expose them. For a moment they hesitated to take the chance, but at last, some of them flying and others swimming, they crossed the open space, and at the same moment they were fired upon by the hunter.

In this narrow limit the shooting was certain, and Don Joaquín enjoyed all the satisfaction of a great hunter, seeing how easily he brought the game down. Centella would dive from the boat, swim over to the birds, which were still alive, and fetch them with a triumphant expression to the hands of the hunter. Tío Paloma's gun was by no means quiet. The old fellow enjoyed flattering his customer, according to custom. When he saw a bird ready to escape, he would shoot, making the bourgeois imagine that it was *he* who had hit the game.

An excellent duck came swimming by, and despite the swift bullet that both Don Joaquin and Tío Paloma sent after it, it disappeared amongst the reeds.

"She's hit!" shouted the old boatman.

The hunter was vexed. What a pity! She would die among the reeds, and they wouldn't be able to get her. . . .

"Look for her, Centella! . . . Go look for her!" shouted Tonet to his setter.

Centella left the boat and dashed into the reeds with a great noise as he thrust them aside in his search.

Tonet smiled, certain of the outcome: the dog would bring that bird back. But his grandfather revealed a certain incredulity. You could wound those birds in one corner of the Albufera, and once they made the reeds, they'd go off to die on the other side. Besides, the dog was as old as he himself. In other days, when Cañamèl had purchased him, he had been good for something, but there was no trusting his scent now. Tonet, scoffing at his grandfather's opinions, simply replied:

*"Ya vorá vosté!* . . . You'll see!"

The dog could be heard splashing about in the mire, now near, now far, and in the silence of the morning the

men followed her endless wandering, guided by the snapping of the reeds and the noise of the twigs breaking before the vigorous animal's advance. After a few minutes' waiting they saw her come out, her countenance dispirited, her eyes sad, her mouth empty.

The old boatman smiled triumphantly. What had he said? . . . But Tonet, feeling himself in a ridiculous position, shouted at the dog, threatening her with his fist to keep her from getting near the boat.

"Go look for her! . . . Look for her!" he cried to the poor animal, imperiously.

And once again she went back to the reeds, wagging her tail diffidently.

She would find the bird. Tonet asserted that confidently, for he had seen her do far more difficult things. Again the splashing of the dog was heard in the aquatic forest. She was going hither and thither uncertainly, every moment changing track, without confidence in any of her aimless scents, not daring to admit defeat, for as soon as she turned toward the boats, showing her head between the reeds, she would see her master's fists and hear his "Look for her!" which was equivalent to a threat.

Several times she returned to the scent, and at last wandered so far off in her invisible hunt that the men could no longer hear the sound of her paws.

A distant bark, repeated several times, caused Tonet to smile. How about that? His old setter might be slow, but nothing escaped her.

The dog continued to bark, far, far off, with a desperate sound, yet without coming nearer. The Cubano whistled.

"Here, Centella, here! . . ."

Once more the dog's splashing was heard, coming gradually nearer. On its path it snapped reeds aside, trod over plants and splashed noisily in the water, swimming with great effort.

"Here, Centella, here! . . ." Tonet continued to shout.

She drew close to the grandfather's boat, and the huntsman suddenly brought his hands to his eyes as if a lightning flash had blinded him.

*"Mare de Deu!* Mother of God!" he howled in terror, as his gun fell from his hands.

Tonet arose with a mad look in his eyes, trembling from head to foot, as if his lungs had suddenly felt need of air. Beside his boat he saw a bundle of rags, and inside something livid and gelatinous, squirming with leeches: a swollen infant's head, deformed, blackish, with its eye-sockets empty, and the ball of the eye hanging from one of them: all of it so repellent, so ill-smelling, that it seemed of a sudden to darken the water and the surrounding landscape, causing night to fall over the lake in the midst of bright day.

He raised his pole with both hands, and dealt the dog such a tremendous blow that the animal's skull cracked as if it were broken, and the poor creature, uttering a pitiable howl, sank with its prey into the eddying waters.

Then he stared with bulging eyes at his grandfather, who had not realized the meaning of it all, and at poor Don Joaquín, who seemed overwhelmed by terror. Rowing by sheer instinct, he shot like an arrow across the water, as if the spectre of remorse that had been slumbering for a week had all at once arisen, and was pursuing him, scratching his back with its implacable claws.

## X

HE did not get very far. Entering the lake proper he saw several boats and heard the cries of those who were manning them; he desired to conceal himself, filled with the shame of one who finds himself naked to the gaze of strangers.

The sun seemed to wound him: the vast surface of the lake frightened him; he felt the necessity of crouching into an obscure corner, of seeing and hearing nothing; and he turned back, entering the reeds again.

He did not proceed far. The prow of the boat sank into the reeds, and the wretched fellow, dropping the pole, fell to the bottom of the boat with his head buried in his hands. For a long time the birds ceased to chirp, the sounds of nature about him were stilled, as if the life hidden among the reeds had become silent, terrified by a savage roar, a choking wail, like the sobs of a dying man.

The wretch was weeping. After his stultifying drunken spree, which had kept him completely insensitive, the crime now arose before him, as if no time had passed since its perpetration,—as if he had just committed it. At the very moment when he thought the memory of his deed was to be effaced forever, fate had brought it back to life, had flaunted it before his eyes, and in what a shape!

Remorse awoke his paternal instincts, which had been dead since that fatal night. Horror made him feel his crime with cruel intensity. That flesh and blood which

he had abandoned to the reptiles of the lake was his own flesh and blood; that mass of flesh, the abode of leeches and worms, was the fruit of his passionate impulses, of his insatiable love amid the silence of night.

The enormity of the crime overwhelmed him. There was no excuse: he need seek no pretexts, as formerly, to go on like this. He was a wretch, unworthy of living: a withered branch on the tree of the Palomas, which had been ever erect, ever vigorous, harsh and savage, but sound in the midst of its isolation. The bad branch must be lopped off.

His grandfather was right to despise him. His father, his poor father, who now looked to him as great as a saint, was right in having disowned him, as an infamous offshoot of his existence. Unhappy Borda, despite her shameful origin, was more a child of the Palomas than he.

What had he accomplished in all his life? Nothing; he had possessed will enough only to run from work. Unfortunate Sangonera had been better than he: alone in the world, without a family, needing nothing in his dire existence as a tramp, he might well live his indolent life, with the sweet nonchalance of the birds. But he, devoured as he had been by passionate appetites, egotistically shunning work, had wished to be wealthy, to live an easy life, by following crooked paths, scorning the advice of his father, who had foreseen the danger; and from this undignified laziness he had fallen into crime.

His deed horrified him. As his paternal instincts awoke, they gnawed at his conscience, but he suffered from an even deeper, more bloody wound. His masculine pride,

his ambition to be strong and dominate men by his intrepidity, tortured him now cruelly. He could behold afar the punishment of his crime,—the penitentiary,—and who could tell, perhaps the scaffold,—the apotheosis of the man-beast! He accepted all this, for after all, it had been made for men; but it should have been for something worthy of a strong man, for a quarrel, for having slain a man face to face, smeared with blood to the elbows, in the wild rage of the human being who becomes transformed into a beast. . . . But to have killed a newborn infant whose only defense was its wailing! To confess before the world that he, the bold man, the former soldier, when he finally stooped to crime had dared only to assassinate his own child!

And he wept and wept, stricken more by shame at his cowardice and scorn of his own vileness than by remorse.

In the darkness of his thought shone, like a tiny spark, a certain confidence in himself. He was not bad. He had his father's red, good blood. His crime had been egotism; weak will, which had caused him to shirk his part in the struggle for life. Neleta had been the really perverse creature, the superior power that chained him, the iron egotism that dominated his own, folding him about all its outlines like a clinging garment. Ah, if he had never known her! If, on his return from foreign parts he had not found her sea-green eyes fixed upon him and seeming to say: "Take me; I am rich now; I have realized my life's ambition; now only you are lacking!"

She had been temptation; the impulse that had cast him into darkness; the egotism and greed masked as love which had guided him to crime. In order to preserve a

few crumbs more of her fortune she had not hesitated to abandon a piece of her own flesh and blood; and he, a conscienceless slave, had completed the work by destroying his own child.

How wretched his existence appeared to him now! There came to him vaguely the old legend of Sancha, that tale of the serpent which was repeated by the generations that grew up beside the lake. He was like the shepherd of the tale: he had caressed the serpent when she was young, had fed her, imparting even the heat of his body to her; and when he had returned from the war, astonished to find her grown so big, strong and beautiful, she had wound about him with a fatal embrace, slaying him with her caresses.

His serpent was in the town, as that of the shepherd had been in the wild plains. That Sancha of Palmar, from her seat in the tavern, was the one who had slain him with the inflexible coils of crime.

He did not care to return to the world. It was impossible to live among people: he could not look them in the face; everywhere he would see that deformed swollen, monstrous little head, its hollow sockets devoured by the water worms. At the mere thought of Neleta a veil of blood would pass before his eyes, and amidst his feelings of repentance would surge a homicidal desire,—the impuse to kill her whom he now considered his implacable enemy. . . . But why a new crime?

There, in the silence and solitude, far from every glance, he felt better, and there he wished to remain.

Besides, an all-absorbing fear was rising in him with all the power of egotism,—the one passion of his life. Perhaps at this very moment the news of the horrible

event was circulating through Palmar. His grandfather would keep his mouth closed, but that stranger from the city had no reason to keep silence. They would hunt out and investigate, the guards with the polished three-cornered hats would come from the suburb of Ruzafa; he was not brave enough to bear their glances, he would not be able to lie; he would confess his crime, and his father, that saintly toiler, would die of shame. . . . And even if he succeeded in sticking to his lie and saving his neck, what would he gain by it? Return to Neleta's arms,—be stifled again in the reptile's coils? . . . No; all was over. He was the rotten branch; he must fall; he must not persist, dead and sapless as he was, in remaining on the tree, paralyzing its life.

He was no longer crying. With a supreme effort of his will he shook himself loose of his melancholy introspection.

Cañamèl's gun had fallen in the prow of the boat. Tonet looked at it with an ironic expression. How the tavern-keeper would laugh if he could see him now! For the first time, the parasite that had battened at his expense was going to employ in a good deed something which he had taken from him.

With automatic tranquillity he removed one of his sandals, kicking it far away. He raised the two locks of the musket, and opening his blouse and his shirt, bent over the weapon until his naked breast leaned against the double mouth.

The bare foot rose slowly along the butt, seeking the triggers, and all at once a double detonation shook the reeds with such force that from every direction the birds whirled about in the flight of fear.

Tío Paloma did not return to Palmar until early evening.

He had left his hunter in Saler, for the latter had wished to get out of the lake as soon as possible and reach the city, vowing that he would never return to that vicinity. Two trips and two misfortunes! The Albufera alone held such terrible surprises in store for him. This last one was going to send him to bed sick. The peaceful citizen, father of a numerous progeny, could not erase from his memory the horrible bundle that had passed before his gaze. Surely as soon as he reached his house he would have to take to bed, pretending some pain or other. The surprise had shaken him to the depths.

The hunter himself counselled Tío Paloma to keep absolutely silent. Let not a word of this escape him! They had seen nothing. He must tell his poor grandson to keep quiet, too; he had fled, no doubt, as a result of the terrible surprise. The lake had again swallowed its secret, and it would be stupid of them to speak, knowing how justice overtakes the innocent when they commit the folly of going in search of it. Honest men should avoid all contact with the law. . . . And the poor gentleman, after landing, refused to enter the carry-all until the boatman, more and more pensive each moment, swore several times that he would be mute.

When, that night, Tío Paloma arrived at Palmar, he moored before the tavern the two boats in which they had left that morning.

Neleta, standing behind the counter, sought Tonet in vain.

The old man guessed whom she was looking for.

"Don't expect him," he said in a grim voice. "He'll never return."

And with an insinuating tone of voice he asked whether she were feeling better, mentioning her pallor with an innuendo that caused her to tremble.

The woman guessed at once that Tío Paloma knew her secret.

"But what about Tonet?" she asked again, with an anguished voice.

The old man averted his eyes as he spoke, as if not caring to look at her, so that he might preserve his forced calm. Tonet would never return. He had fled far, very far: to a land whence none ever returns. It was the best thing he could have done. . . . In that way everything was plunged forever in mystery and settled for good.

"But you? . . . What about you?" groaned Neleta in anguish, fearing that the old man should tell what he knew.

Tío Paloma would keep his mouth shut. This he affirmed by striking his chest. He despised his grandson, but it was to his interest that nothing should be learned. The name of the Palomas, after centuries of high prestige, was not going to be dragged in the mud by a lazy good-for-nothing and his slut.

"Weep, girl, weep!" said the boatman irritatedly.

She might well weep for the rest of her life, now that she had ruined an entire family. Let her keep her money! She needn't be afraid that he would come asking her for some in exchange for his silence. . . . And if she wished to know where her lover was, and her son likewise, all she had to do was look into the lake. La Albufera, the

mother of them all, would keep the secret as faithfully as he.

Neleta was terrified by this revelation; but even in her great surprise she looked at the old man uneasily, fearing to see it entrusted to Tío Paloma's silence.

Once more the old man beat his breast. She could live happy and enjoy her riches. He would be silent forever.

It was a gloomy night that they passed in the cabin of the Palomas. By the dying light of a lamp the grandfather and the father, seated facing each other, talked for a long time, with the gravity of persons who are separated by traits of character, and whom only misfortune can bring together.

Tío Paloma related the tale without circumlocution. He had seen the suicide son, his breast rent by two discharges of bird shot, sunk in the mud of the *mata* with his feet sticking out of the water, near the abandoned boat. Tío Tòni scarcely blinked. Only his lips pressed convulsively together, and his rigid finger scratched his knees.

A harsh, prolonged lament rose from a dark corner of the cabin where the kitchen was situated, as if someone were being flayed in the gloom. It was La Borda moaning, terrified by the news.

"Silence, girl!" cried the old man imperiously.

"Hush, hush!" said the father.

And the unhappy girl stifled her sobs, oppressed in her grief by the firmness of these two iron-willed men, who, stabbed by misfortune, remained externally impassive, betraying not the slightest emotion in their eyes.

Tío Paloma told the story in rapid outline. The appearance of the dog with its horrible prey, Tonet's flight:

then, the return to Saler, his careful exploration of the *mata,* with the presentiment of a misfortune, and his discovery of the corpse. He had foreseen everything. He had recalled Tonet's disappearance on the day of the celebration; Neleta's pallor and weakness; her wan, sickly face after that night, and with his old man's wiliness he filled in the missing scenes,—the agonizing birth during the silence of the night, with the terror of being heard by the neighbors, and then the infanticide, a crime that caused him to despise Tonet more as a coward than as a criminal.

The old man, after revealing his secret, felt relieved. His sadness was now followed by indignation. The wretches! That Neleta was a hot-blooded woman who had ruined the boy, impelling him to crime so that her money might be saved; but Tonet was doubly a coward, and he despised him not only for the crime, but even more for his committing suicide, crazed with fear, rather than taking his punishment. The *señor* had sent two shots into himself rather than face the music: he found it easier to disappear than to pay for his crime with the proper sentence. Always fleeing his obligations, seeking the easiest way out sooner than put up a fight. What times, Christ! What sort of youth was today's generation? . . .

His son scarcely heard him. He sat motionless, overwhelmed by the misfortune, and bowed his head, as if his father's words were a blow that struck him down forever.

La Borda began to groan again.

"Silence, I said! Silence!" cried Tío Tòni in a grim voice.

Amidst his deep grief, silent and repressed as it was, it

provoked him that others should find relief in tears, while he, because of his powerful masculine character, could not melt his sorrow in weeping.

At last Tío Tòni spoke. His voice did not quiver, but it was veiled with the feeble hoarseness of emotion.

The shameful death of that unhappy fellow was an end worthy of his conduct. He had warned him that he would meet a bad end. When you are born poor, idleness is a crime. That's how God arranged matters, and one must conform. . . . But ay! It was his son. . . . his son! . . . His own flesh and blood! His iron-willed rectitude as an honest man was insensible to the catastrophe; but there, inside his bosom, he felt a certain oppression, as if part of his very heart had been torn out and was now serving as food for the eels of the Albufera.

He wished to see him for the last time,—did his father understand? . . . He wished to hold him in his arms, as he had done when the lad was an infant, when he had lulled him to sleep singing him a song about how his father would work to make him a wealthy farmer, the owner of many fields.

"Father. . . . Father!" he cried in an anguished voice to Tío Paloma. "Where is he?"

The old man replied with indignation. They ought to leave matters as accident had arranged them. It was sheer madness to alter their course. Let there be no scandals, no unveiling of the mystery. Things were all right as they were: everything hidden.

People, when they no longer saw Tonet, would believe that he had gone off in search of adventures and a gay life, as he had done when he left for America. The lake would guard its secret well: years would go by before

anybody would pass the spot where the suicide was. The vegetation of the Albufera covers everything. Besides, if they were to speak, news of the death would be spread broadcast, everybody would want to know more about it, justice would intervene, the truth would be discovered, and instead of only a Paloma who had disappeared, his shame known to them alone, they would have a Paloma in dishonor, who had slain himself to escape prison and perhaps the scaffold. No; Tono; he said this with all his paternal authority. For the few months left him let them respect him, not embitter his final days with dishonor. He wished to drink peacefully with the other boatmen, and be able to look them in the face. Everything was well: silence, then. . . . Besides, if they were to discover the body, they could not inter it in holy ground. His crime and his suicide deprived him of the right to share the same ground as the others. It was better that he should lie in the water there, sunk in the mud, surrounded by reeds, as the last accursed scion of a famous dynasty of fishermen.

Excited by La Borda's weeping, the old man threatened her. She must keep quiet. Did she wish to ruin them?

The night seemed endless and tragically silent. The lugubrious atmosphere of the cabin seemed gloomier than ever, as if the black wings of misfortune were beating about it.

Tío Paloma, with the insensibility of the harsh, egotistic old curmudgeon who desires to prolong his life, dozed in the mat-weed chair. His son spent the hours in rigid immobility, his eyes dilated, fixed upon the wavering shadows that the trembling light of the lamp traced upon the wall. La Borda, seated by the hearth, was sobbing weakly, hidden in the darkness.

There was a moment in which Tío Tòni shuddered, as if awakening. He arose, went to the cabin door, and opening it, gazed at the starry sky. It must be about three. The calm of the night seemed to penetrate him, strengthening the resolution which he had just formed.

He approached the old man and shoved him till he woke him.

"Father. . . . Father!" he said in a supplicating voice. "Where is he?"

Tío Paloma, half asleep, protested furiously. Let them not disturb him. There was no remedy for this. He wished to sleep, and would to God he would never wake up! . . .

But Tío Tòni continued to beg him. He must remember that it was his grandson; he, who was the boy's father, could not rest easy until he looked upon him for the last time. He would be imagining him at all hours at the bottom of the lake, rotted by the waters, devoured by the aquatic creatures, without being buried in the earth the same as the most wretched of persons,—even that Sangonera, who had lived without a father. Ay! To labor all one's life long in order to make sure of bread for his only son, and then leave him to his fate, without even knowing where he was buried, like the dead dogs that are thrown into the lake. It could not be, father! It was too cruel! He would never be brave enough to sail the lake imagining that perhaps his boat would be passing over his son's corpse.

"Father. . . . Father!" he implored, shaking the old man out of his sleep.

Tío Paloma jumped up as if he were about to strike his son. Was he going to let him in peace? . . . Look for

that coward again? . . . Let them permit him to sleep! He didn't care to go digging in the mud with the danger of making their family dishonor public.

"But . . . where is he?" asked the father, anxiously.

He would go alone; but, by God! he must tell him the place. If the grandfather refused to speak, he felt that he would spend the rest of his life dragging the lake, even if he made the secret public.

"In the *mata* of the *Bolodró*," said the old man at last. "And you'll have a job to find him."

He closed his eyes and sunk his head to resume the sleep from which he did not care to wake.

Tío Tòni made a sign to La Borda. They took their spades, their poles, the sharp spears that served for spearing large fishes, lighted a lantern at the lamp, and amidst the silence of the night crossed the town to reach the canal and set sail.

The dark boat, with the lantern at the prow, spent the entire night winding in and out of the clumps of sedge. It looked like a red star wandering amid the reeds.

Near dawn the light was extinguished. The corpse had been found, after two hours of anxious search; just as the grandfather had seen it. The head was sunk in the mud, the feet thrust out of the water, and the bosom a bleeding mass, torn by the discharge of the bird shot.

They pulled him out of the water with their spears. The father, as he thrust the *fitora* into that soft mass, raising it into the boat with a superhuman effort, felt as if he were sinking it into his own bosom.

There followed a slow, agonizing progress, as they looked in every direction, like criminals fearing detection. La Borda, still sobbing, managed the pole at the prow:

the father helped her at the other end, and between these two rigid figures, whose black silhouette stood out against the vague light of the starry night, lay stretched the body of the suicide.

They reached Tío Tòni's fields, that artificial soil which had been formed pailful by pailful, by ceaseless toil, with mad persistence.

The father and La Borda, taking the body, lowered it carefully to earth, as if it were a sick person whom they feared to waken. Then with their industrious spades they commenced to dig a grave.

Only a week before they had been bringing earth from every corner of the lake. Now they were taking it out to conceal the family dishonor.

It was already daybreak when they lowered the body into the bottom of the grave, which oozed water from all sides. A cold, bluish light was shed over the Albufera, imparting to its surface the hard glint of steel. Through the gray space there passed in triangular formation the first flock of birds.

Tío Tòni took a last look at his son. Then he turned aside, as if he were ashamed of the first tears that finally melted the hardness of his eyes.

His life was over. So many years of battling against the lake, believing that he was accumulating a fortune, and without knowing it, all the time, preparing his son's grave! . . .

He stamped upon that earth which now contained the essence of his life. First he had dedicated to it his sweat, his strength, his illusions: now, when he had been on the point of fertilizing it, he gave to it his own flesh and

blood, his son, his successor, his hope,—and this was the end of his work.

The earth would fulfil its mission: the harvest would grow like a sea of copper-colored ears above Tonet's corpse. But as for him . . . what was there left for him to do upon earth?

The father wept as he contemplated the void of his existence; the solitude that waited for him till death, as monotonous, endless and unruffled as the lake which gleamed before his eyes, without a boat to cleave its smooth surface.

And while Tío Tòni's lamentations rent the silence of the dawn like a howl of despair, La Borda, seeing that her father had turned his back, bent over the edge of the grave and kissed the livid head with an ardent kiss,—a kiss of immense passion, of hopeless love, daring, before the mystery of death, to reveal for the first time the secret of her life.

THE END